

ON SPEC

The Canadian Magazine of Speculative Writing

FALL 1996

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ON·SPEC

FALL 1996

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COMMITTED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURE AND THE ARTS

ON this Issue

Talkin' about the passion...

Jena Snyder, Production Editor

At Con-Version in Calgary this July, all four ON SPEC editors, myself, Barry Hammond, Susan MacGregor, and Diane L. Walton, presented the panel discussion "Behind the Scenes at ON SPEC." Here's a sampling:

"There are four of you editing. Does that mean you have to come to a consensus to buy a story?"

No. Every time we read (probably 80-100 stories and poems quarterly), we each find stories we feel are top-notch. Very rarely do we all agree on "top-notch." We often (most of the time) argue loud and long at the meetings we call "Fight Nights." After all, when I'm putting together an issue, I can only squeeze in about 6-8 stories and a couple of poems — we can't buy everything that we think is "pretty good." Instead we have to focus on no more than perhaps the best 10-15 stories and reject the rest. So how to we ever decide which stories to buy?

A story I think is brilliant might well be one Diane thinks is too dark. One she likes, Barry may consider too tame. Susan might think we're all crazy. But if one of us is willing to fight for a story — even if all the others disagree — that story is far more likely to be bought than another one we all feel is "pretty good." If no one's particularly excited over a story, we pass on it.

Each one of us has a particular passion when it comes to writing:

Barry likes to see the rules broken: if an author can successfully fly in the face of convention, doing something unique with style or voice, or taking a timeworn theme and putting his or her own personal stamp on it, that's the story Barry will be fighting for. He attaches special emphasis to a strong and unique voice in a story.

Diane wants to see character-driven stories that deal with relationships rather than things. What she finds interesting in a story is the way the characters interact, how they resolve conflict — using the wide and varied SF world to talk about the human condition. Quirky and off the wall would describe her favorite stories, ones that say something new and exciting and wonderful, something that hasn't been said before.

Susan's first and foremost consideration is coherence: she insists on the author tying all aspects of a story together. Metaphors and similes should mirror character or theme. She loves symbolism and layers, especially when the story works on a number of different levels from straight entertainment to spiritual truth. Telling "a damn good story" is only a small part of getting Susan to fight for a story; to really convince her, the author should be furthering the art, putting his or her own mark on

ON SPEC DEADLINES

Nov. 30/96, Feb. 28/97,
May 31/97, Aug. 31/97

Submissions received after a deadline will be held for the next deadline.

All submissions must be in COMPETITION FORMAT: no author name on manuscript. Enclose self-addressed, stamped envelope with sufficient postage to cover return of manuscript (or mark "Disposable" and include SASE for reply only), and covering letter with name, address, phone number, story title and word count. Details, page 95.

ON SPEC Ad Deadlines:

Nov. 15 SPRING issue
Feb. 15 SUMMER issue
May 15 FALL issue
Aug 15 WINTER issue

ON SPEC Ad Rates:

Classified (per word) \$1
1/4 pg./bus. card \$75
1/2 pg. \$125
Full pg. \$175
Inside front or back
cover (b & w) \$225
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the story, expressing how he or she feels or thinks about different things.

I'm a tough and demanding reader: like Susan, I want a story that works on a number of different levels, and I'm not satisfied unless the writer is both entertaining me *and* giving me an insight into something I haven't already seen, be it scientific, psychological, metaphysical, or even horrific. Like Barry and Diane, I want to see something new and unique, not just a cute story about cats in space (we've seen at least 20 of those). I'm open to anything, but above all, a story has to move me. If I don't feel anything for the characters — sympathy, hatred, kindness, anger, whatever — then why should I don't care what they do or what happens to them? Melodrama won't cut it, and neither will simply pushing buttons: to sell me a story, an author has to inject it with real passion, the kind that rises out of what the characters do in response to each other and to the conflicts facing them.

All the submissions coming to the magazine should be in competition format, or are mutilated to fit that format before the editors ever see them. We don't fight for a story because someone we know wrote it, or even because it's written by "A Big Name": the story has to sell itself. It has to woo us, hook us, inspire us, move us, even make us cry — in other words, it has to be so full of passion it rouses a similar passion in at least one of us to take up the fight.



Late-breaking news

Ellen Datlow in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* anthology, had this to say about ON SPEC: "ON SPEC, edited by a rotating board—members of the Copper Pig [Writers'] Society, a writer's collective—always has fine writing in whatever genre it's showcasing. The art is also consistently excellent. ... Highly recommended." And about our own anthology: "ON SPEC: The First Five Years, edited by the ON SPEC Editorial Collective, is an anthology of twenty-two stories from this generally excellent Canadian cross-genre magazine."

Listed in the Honorable Mentions were: **ALISON BAIRD**, for "Dragon Pearl"; **SANDRA KASTURI**, this year's Lydia Langstaff Memorial Prize winner, for her poems, "The Changeling" and "Winter Aconite" (a third poem "Five Cantos..." was published in *Transversions*); **SUSAN MacGREGOR**, for "About Face"; and **LORINA J. STEPHENS**, for "For a Cup of Tea."

Also given an Honorable Mention, this time in *The Year's Best Science Fiction*, was **EILEEN KERNAGHAN**, for "Night Music," which appeared in our Spring 1995 Horror Special Issue. Congratulations to all of you!



About our cover artist, Kenneth Scott

KENNETH SCOTT has recently won L. Ron Hubbard's Illustrators of the Future contest and is appearing in Volume XII of *Writers of the Future*. He has been contributing to *ON SPEC* since Fall '92, and has received one Aurora nomination for his gloomy and foreboding cover for the Over the Edge theme issue. This is his second cover for *ON SPEC*, and he hopes to have art prints available for sale soon. Kenneth doesn't live anywhere glamorous, and plays too much DOOM. You can e-mail Kenneth at mfarr@ccinet.ab.ca

SPECULATIVE FICTION WRITING WORKSHOP

NOV. 22 - 24, 1996
BLACK CAT
GUEST RANCH

GUEST EDITORS:

- ◆ Candas Jane Dorsey
- ◆ Nicole Luiken
- ◆ the *ON SPEC* Editors



The workshop features sessions on writing science fiction for adults, instructed by **Candas Jane Dorsey** as well as sessions on writing science fiction for children, instructed by **Nicole Luiken**. Scheduled for Saturday night is a discussion group with the editors of ***ON SPEC Magazine*** and our instructors with the starting topic of "How To Turn Rejections into Acceptances."

The Black Cat Ranch, near Hinton, Alberta, is an historic guest ranch with a reputation for great holidays, delicious home-cooked meals, creativity-boosting workshops and terrific hot tub soaks beneath the stars.

FEE — Double occupancy: \$110/person plus tax. Single occupancy: \$150/person plus tax. Rates include: Friday and Saturday accommodation, 3 meals Saturday plus brunch Sunday, Sat. night session, and either writing SF for adults or children. (\$20 extra to take both).

TO BOOK — call Amber Hayward at 1-800-859-6840.

Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Association
Association canadienne de la science-fiction et du fantastique

PRIX AURORA AWARDS 1996

The 16th annual Canadian SF & Fantasy awards (Prix Aurora Awards 1996) were presented in Calgary, Alberta at Con-Version XIII on July 21st. The Aurora Awards honor Canadians in 10 different categories.

Best Long-Form Work in English / *Meilleur livre en anglais:*

The Terminal Experiment, Robert J. Sawyer

Meilleur livre en français / Best Long-Form Work in French:

Les Voyages Malgré Eux, Élisabeth Vonarburg.

Best Short-Form Work in English / *Meilleure nouvelle en anglais:*

The Perseids, Robert Charles Wilson

Meilleure nouvelle en français / Best Short-Form Work in French:

Équinoxe, Yves Meynard

Best Other Work in English / *Meilleur ouvrage en anglais (Autre):*

Reboot (BLT Productions) (tv series)

Meilleur ouvrage en français (Autre) / Best Other Work in French:

Solaris, Joël Champetier, réd. (Les Compagnons à temps perdu)

Artistic Achievement / *Accomplissement artistique:*

Jean-Pierre Normand

Fan Achievement (Fanzine) / *Accomplissement fanique (Fanzine):*

Under the Ozone Hole, Karl Johanson & John Herbert

Fan Achievement (Organizational) / *Accomplissement fanique (Organisation):*

Jean-Louis Trudel (SFSF Boréal, Prix Boréal)

Fan Achievement (Other) / *Accomplissement fanique (Autre):*

Larry Stewart (entertainer, *personnalité/amuseur*)

The Aurora Awards program has been administered, in recent years, by an Aurora Awards committee which functions independently from Convention organizers. It has complete authority in decisions regarding ballot preparation and counting. Members of the 1996 Aurora Awards committee are Dennis Mullin (Administrator), Gary Frei, Ruth Stuart and Paul Valcour.



"Be it Ever So Humble" originally appeared in the Winter 1991 issue of
Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine

Be it Ever So Humble

Tanya Huff

illustrated by James Beveridge

"So, got any dirt on this place?" Magdelene asked the gold and black lizard sunning itself on a nearby rock.

The lizard, looking more like a beautifully crafted piece of jewelry than a living creature, merely flicked its inner eyelid closed and pretended to be asleep. Children with rocks or nets it had to do something about. Young women in donkey carts who asked stupid questions could safely be ignored.

Magdelene studied the little village nestled along the curve of its natural harbor and chewed reflectively on a strand of chestnut hair. It looked like a nice place but, as much as she wanted to settle down, as tired as she was of constantly packing up and moving on, she knew better than to get her hopes up.

In a dozen years of travelling, she'd learned that the most jewel-like villages, in the most bucolic settings, often had the quaintest customs. Customs like welcoming wandering wizards with an axe, or attempting to convince wandering wizards to stay by outfitting them with manacles and chains, or by suggesting the tarring and feathering of wandering wizards with no better reason than the small matter of a straying husband or two. For the most part, Magdelene had found these customs no more than a minor inconvenience although, had she know the man was married, she would never have suggested they...

She grinned at the memory. He'd proven a lot more flexible than she'd anticipated.

"Well, H'sak?" She spit out the hair and glanced back at the large mirror propped up behind the seat of the cart. "Shall we check it out?"

H'sak, trapped in the mirror, made no answer. Magdelene wasn't entirely certain the demon was aware of what went on outside his prison but, travelling alone, she'd fallen into the habit of talking to him and figured, just in case he ever got out, it couldn't hurt if he had memories of pleasant, albeit one-sided, conversations. Not,

she supposed, that a bit of chat would make up for her trapping him in the mirror in the first place.

Stretching back, she pulled an old cloak down over the glass—no point in upsetting potential neighbors right off—then gathered up the reins and slapped them lightly on the donkey's rump. The donkey, who had worked out an understanding with the wizard early on, took another few mouthfuls of the coarse grass lining the track and slowly started down the hill to the village.

At the first house, Magdelene stopped the cart and sat quietly studying the scene. A few chickens scratched in the sandy dirt that served the village as a main street and a black sow sprawled in the only visible bit of shade, her litter suckling noisily. A lullaby, softly sung, drifted through one of the open windows and from the beach came the screams and laughter of children at play. Just the sort of lazy ambience she appreciated.

"Who are you?"

Languidly, for it was far too hot to be startled, Magdelene turned. A boy, nine or ten years old, naked except for a shell threaded on a frayed piece of gut, peered up at her from under a heavy shock of dusty black hair. Although he showed no signs of malnutrition or neglect, his left arm hung withered and useless by his side.

"My name is Magdelene." She pushed her hair back off her face. "Who are you?"

"Juan." He edged a little closer. "You a trader?"

"No. I'm a wizard." Over the years, she'd discovered life worked out better if she didn't try to hide that. It made explanations so much easier when things started happening. And things always did.

The boy looked her up and down and

tossed his head. "Ha!" he scoffed. "Tell us another one. Wizards got grey hair and warts. You're not old enough to be a wizard."

"I'm twenty-seven," she told him a little indignantly. He was a fine one to talk about not old enough...

"Oh." Juan considered it and apparently decided twenty-seven was sufficiently ancient even without the grey hair and warts. "What about your clothes then? Wizards wear robes and stuff. Everyone knows that."

He had a point. Wizards did wear robes and stuff; usually of a dark, heavy, and imposing fabric; always hot, scratchy, and uncomfortable. Magdelene, who preferred to be comfortable, never bothered.

"I'm the most powerful wizard in the world," she explained as a rivulet of sweat ran under her bright blue breastband, "so I wear what I want."

"Yeah, sure," he snorted. "Prove it."

"All right." She gathered up the multicolored folds of her skirt, jumped down off the cart, and held out her hand. "Give me your arm and I'll fix it."

"Oh no." He backed up a pace and turned, protecting the withered arm behind the rest of his body. "You ain't proving it on me. Find something else."

"Like what?"

Juan thought about it a moment. "Could you send my sister some place far away?" he asked hopefully.

Magdelene thought about that in turn. It didn't seem worth antagonizing the village just to prove a point to one grubby child. "I could, but I don't think I should."

The boy sighed. The kind of sigh that said he knew what the answer would be but thought there could be no harm in asking.

They stood together in silence for a

moment, Magdelene leaning against the back of her cart—perfectly content to do nothing—and Juan digging his toe into the sand. The donkey, who could smell water, decided enough was enough and started towards the center of the village. He was hot, he was thirsty, and he was going to do something about it.

As her backrest jerked forward, Magdelene hit the ground with an unwelcome thud. Closer proximity proved the sand was not as soft as it looked. “Lizard piss,” she muttered, rubbing at a stone-bruise. When she looked up, Juan had disappeared.

She shrugged philosophically and, following along behind the donkey, amused herself by pulling back an image of Juan as an adult. Long and lean and sleekly muscled, it was a future worth sticking around for. At some point between now and then, she appeared to have convinced him to let her fix his arm. It looked like she’d be staying, at least for a while.

An impatient bray demanded her attention and she allowed the image to slip back to its own time; they’d arrived at the well.

When the trough was full, and the donkey had bent his head to drink, Magdelene, pulled by the realization she was no longer alone, slowly turned. All around the edges of the square, stood the children of the village, staring at her with wide dark eyes.

“Yes?” she asked.

The children merely continued to stare.

Demons, she decided, were easier to deal with. At least you always knew what demons wanted.

“Magdelene-lady!”

The children stared on as Magdelene gratefully noted Juan approaching with a adult in tow. The old man had been

bent and twisted by the weight of his years, his fingers warped into shapes more like driftwood than flesh. His skin had been tanned by sun and wind and salt into creased leather and any hair he’d had was long gone. He followed Juan with the rolling gait of a life spent at sea and his jaws worked to the rhythm of his walking.

“Whacha doing sitting around like a pile of fish guts?” he growled at the children as he stopped an arm’s length from Magdelene and glared about. “Untie her beast, put him to pasture, and get that wagon in the shade.”

The children hesitated.

“You are staying a bit?” he asked, his growl softening, his dark eyes meeting hers.

Magdelene smiled her second best smile—she couldn’t be certain his heart would be up to her best—and said, “Yes.” She wanted very much to stay for a bit. Maybe this time things would work out.

The old man nodded and waved both twisted hands. “You heard her. Get!”

They got, Juan with the rest, and Magdelene watched bemused as her donkey was lead away and her cart was pulled carefully to rest under a stand of palm.

“Boy says you told him you’re a wizard.”

“That’s right.”

“Don’t have much need for a wizard here. Wizards make you soft and then the sea takes you. We prefer to do things for ourselves.”

“So do I,” Magdelene told him, leaning back against the damp stones. “Prefer to have people do things for themselves, that is.” She grinned. She liked this old man and sensed in him a kindred spirit. “To be honest, I like people to do things for me as well.”

He returned the grin and his eyes twinkled as he looked her up and down. "Ah, child," he cackled, "what I could do for you if I were only fifty years younger."

"Would you like to be?" she asked, rather hoping he would.

He laughed, then he realized she was serious. "You could do that?"

"Yes."

His gaze turned inward and Magdelene could feel the strength of the memories he sifted. After a moment, he sighed and shook his head. "Foolish wishes, child. I've earned my age and I'll wear it with honor."

Magdelene hid her disappointment. Personally, she couldn't see the honor in blurred eyesight, aching bones, and swollen, painful joints but if that was his choice...

There were sixteen buildings in the village, eight goats, eleven pigs, twenty-one chickens, and fourteen boats. No one had ever managed an accurate count of the cats.

"Six families came here three generations ago," Carlos, the old man, explained as they stood on the beach watching boats made tiny by distance slide up and down the rolling waves. Through his eyes, Magdelene saw the harbor as it had been, sparkling untouched in the sun, never sailed, never fished, theirs. "I'm the last of the first. I've outlived two wives and most of my children as well."

"Do you mind?" Magdelene asked, knowing she was likely to see entire civilizations rise and fall in her lifetime and not entirely certain how she felt about it.

"Well..." He considered the question for a moment. "I'll live 'til I die. Nothing else I can do."

"You didn't answer my question."

He patted her cheek. "I know."

That night, in the crowded main room of the headman's house, Carlos presented Magdelene to the adults of the village. "...and she'd like to stay on a bit."

"A wizard," the headman ruminated. "That's something we don't see everyday."

Magdelene missed much of the discussion that followed as she was busy trying to make eye contact with a very attractive young man standing by one of the deep windows. She gave up when she realized that he was trying to make eye contact with a very attractive young man standing by the door.

"...although frankly, we'd rather you were a trader."

"The traders are late this year?" Magdelene guessed, hoping she hadn't missed anything important.

"Aye. They've always come with the kayle."

Just in time, she remembered that kayle were fish.

"Surely you saw them on the road?" a young woman asked hopefully.

"No." Magdelene frowned as she thought back over the last few weeks of travel. "I didn't." The emptiness of the trail hadn't seemed strange to her at the time. It did now.

"I don't suppose you can conjure one?" asked a middle-aged woman dryly, tamping down her pipe.

The room rippled with laughter.

"I could," Magdelene admitted.

The room fell silent.

Magdelene cleared her throat. She might as well get it over with. "I'm the most powerful wizard in the world," she began.

The middle-aged woman snorted. "Says who?"

"Well, uh..."

"Doesn't matter. Would this conjured trader do us any good?"

"Probably not." A trader conjured suddenly into the village would be more likely to trade in strong hysterics than anything useful.

"I thought as much." The woman expertly lit her pipe with a spill from the lamp. "What in Neto's breath are we wasting our time here for, that's what I want to know? We've kayle to bring in at dawn and I hear my bed calling."

"I though you might like to know that a stranger, a wizard, has come to the village," Carlos told her tartly.

She snorted again. "All right. Now we know." She pointed the stem of her pipe at Magdelene and demanded, "You planning on causing any trouble?"

"Of course not," Magdelene declared emphatically. She never *planned* on causing any trouble.

"Will you keep your nose out of what doesn't concern you?"

She had to think about that for a moment, wondering how broad a definition could be put on what didn't concern her. "I'll try."

"See that you do."

"So I can stay for a while?"

"For a while." Her head wreathed in smoke, the woman rose. "That's that then," she said shortly, and left.

The headman sighed and raised both hands in a gesture of defeat. "You heard her. You can go."

As people began to leave, Magdelene leaned over and whispered to Carlos, "Why does he let her get away with that?"

Carlos snickered, his palm lying warm and dry on Magdelene's arm. "Force of habit," he said in his normal speaking voice. "She's his older sister, raised him after their mother drowned. Refused to be headwoman, said she

didn't have the time, but she runs every meeting he calls."

The headman smiled, for Carlos' speech had risen clearly over the noise of the departing villagers. "Look at it this way, grandfather; the village gets two fish on one piece of bait. I do all the work and Yolanda does all the talking." He stood, stretched, and turned to Magdelene. "Have you got a bed, Wizard?"

Studying the muscles of his torso, still corded and firm for all his forty odd years, Magdelene considered several replies. All of which she discarded after catching a speaking glance from the headman's wife.

"While the weather holds," she sighed, "I'm perfectly comfortable under my cart."

"And I am perfectly comfortable," she sighed again a half hour later, plumping up the pillows on her huge feather bed, "but I wouldn't mind some company." As if in answer to her request, the canvas flaps hanging from the sides of the cart parted and Juan poked in his head. "I was thinking," she muttered to whatever gods were listening, "of company a little older."

Juan blinked, shook his head, and gazed around curiously. "How'd you get all this stuff under here?" he demanded.

"I told you," Magdelene poured herself a glass of chilled grape juice, "I'm the most powerful wizard in the world." She dabbed at the spreading purple stain on the front of her tunic. "Can I fix your arm now?"

He didn't answer, just crawled forward and found himself in a large room that held—besides the bed—a wardrobe, an overstuffed armchair, and a huge book bound in red leather lying closed on a wooden stand. "Where's the

wagon?"

Magdelene pointed at the ceiling, impressed by his attitude. She'd had one or two supposed adults fall gibbering to the carpet.

Juan looked up. Dark red runes had been scrawled across the rough boards of the ceiling. "What's that writing on there?"

"The spell that allows this room to exist."

"Oh." He had little or no interest in spells. "Got any more juice?"

She handed him a full glass and watched him putter about, poking his nose into everything. Setting his glass down on the book, he pulled open the wardrobe door.

"What's that?"

"It's a demon trapped in a mirror, what's it look like?" She'd hung the mirror of the inside of the door that afternoon, figuring H'sak was safer there than in the wagon.

"How long's he been in there?"

"Twelve years."

"How long you gonna keep him in there?"

"Until I let him out."

An answer that would have infuriated an adult, suited Juan fine. He took one last admiring look at H'sak, finished his juice, and handed Magdelene the empty glass. "I better get home."

"Juan."

About to step through the canvas walls, he glanced back over his shoulder.

"You still haven't told me if I can fix your arm."

His gaze slid over to the demon and then back to the wizard. He shrugged. "Maybe later," he said, and left.

Magdelene spent most of the next three days with Carlos. The children treated

her like an exotic curiosity and she tried to live up to their expectations. The adults treated her with a wary suspicion and she tried *not* to live up to theirs. Carlos treated her like a friend.

The oldest in the village by a good twenty years, his eyes sometimes twinkled and sparkled and looked no older than Juan's. Sometimes they burned with more mature fires and she longed to give him back his youth if only for a few hours behind the dunes. Sometimes they appeared deeper and blacker and wiser than the night sky. Sometimes they just looked old. Marvelling, she realized that he remembered all the ages he had been and more, that they were with him still, making a home, not a prison, of his age. This was his strength and Magdelene placed the lesson it taught her carefully away with her other precious things.

She began to hope the village had a place for her.

On the morning of the fourth day, they'd gathered about the well—the wizard and the few adults who remained ashore due to age or disability—when the high pitched shriek of a child jerked all heads around.

"Riders!"

Screaming out the news of their discovery, Juan and three of the other children burst into the centre of the village. The chickens panicked, screeched, and scattered. The adults tried to make sense out of the cacophony.

"One at a time!" The baker finally managed to make himself heard. "Juan, what happened?"

"Riders, Uncle!" Juan told him, bouncing in his excitement. "Five of them. On horses. Coming here!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes! We were going up the track to look for gooseberries..." The other three

children nodded vigorously in agreement. "...and we met them coming down."

"They aren't traders?"

Juan sighed in exaggerated exasperation. "Uncle, I seen traders before. And these aren't..." He noticed the baker was no longer looking at him, noticed no one was looking at him, so he let the last word trail off and he turned.

They rode slowly, with a ponderous certainty more threatening than a wild charge. Voluminous robes in tans and browns hid all but their eyes and each wore a long, curved blade. They stopped, the line of horses reflecting the line of the well, and the rider in the center let the fabric drop from his face.

Nice, thought Magdelene, continuing to stroke the black and white cat sprawled across her lap. *Good cheek bones, flashing eyes, full lips, and,* she realized, shoulders drooping a little in disappointment, *about as congenial as H'sak.*

"We have come," said the rider, "for the kayle."

Carlos stepped forward, his hand on Juan's shoulder—both to support himself and to keep the boy from doing anything rash. "What do you have to trade?" he asked levelly.

"Your lives," replied the rider and his hand dropped to the hilt of his sword.

Magdelene rolled her eyes. She'd never much cared for melodrama.

"If you take the kayle, we will have nothing when the traders come."

"The traders will not come. The Warlord rules here."

"I don't recall being conquered," Carlos snapped, temper showing at last.

The rider smiled, showing perfect teeth and no sense of humor. "You are being conquered now." The line of horses took a single step in intimidating

unison.

Juan's one hand curled into a fist.

Magdelene stood, dumping the indignant cat to the ground.

"Just one minute," she began.

"SILENCE, WOMAN!" the rider thundered.

"Stuff a sock in it." She brushed cat hair off her skirt. "You're not impressing anyone."

For just an instant, acute puzzlement replaced the rider's belligerent expression. A people in the process of being terrorized simply did not behave in this fashion. With a perceivable effort, he regained his scowl and drew his sword. To either side, his men did the same.

"Kill them all," he said.

The horses leapt forward and vanished.

The saddles and the riders hung in the air for one long second then crashed to the ground, raising great clouds of dust and more panicked squawking from the chickens.

"And, as you want the kayle so badly," Magdelene said.

Steel swords became silver fish making desperate attempts to get free of the grip on their tails.

The children laughed and pointed.

When they found they couldn't release the fish, the riders began to panic.

"When you get back to your warlord," Magdelene told them, smiling pleasantly, "you'll be able to let go. If I can make a suggestion, don't waste any time. Very shortly those fish are not going to be the best of travelling companions."

Throwing garbage and clods of dirt, the children chased the riders from the village.

Magdelene turned and saw four of the five adults regarding her with awe. Carlos merely looked thoughtful.

"With luck, they'll convince their warlord that this village is more trouble than it's worth," Magdelene explained reassuringly, rubbing at the beads of sweat between her breasts. "Unless he has a wizard of his own, he'll only be beaten again if he comes back." She didn't add that even if he did have a wizard, he'd still be beaten—it sounded too much like bragging. Even though it was true.

"And without luck?" Carlos prodded.

Magdelene sighed. "Without luck, I'll just have to convince him myself. But I hope he does the sensible thing."

Carlos snorted. "Men who style themselves 'The Warlord' seldom do the sensible thing."

"Men in general seldom do the sensible thing." Magdelene winked at the baker who had, after all, only lost one leg at sea. "Fortunately, they have other uses."

Carlos cackled wildly. The baker blushed.

"...although you did say you'd keep out of what didn't concern you."

"My home concerns me."

Yolanda peered at Magdelene through a cloud of pipe smoke. "Home is it? I thought you were just staying for a while?"

"The village needs me."

"We neither need nor want you taking care of us," the older woman growled.

"Good. Because I wasn't planning to." Even through the smoke, she could see Yolanda's eyes narrow. The five empty saddles had been piled by the well when the fishing fleet returned. "I'll be like the seawall. Just another buffer against the storms." She spread her arms. "Without me, the persecutions your people left could well follow them."

"This warlord could send others," Carlos pointed out, pulling himself to his feet with a hand on the wizard's shoulder. "We have no way to defend ourselves."

"I can be your defenses," Magdelene insisted.

Yolanda's teeth ground against her pipe stem. "You could use your power to enslave us."

"I could... But why would I bother?"

She sounded so sincerely puzzled that Carlos began to laugh. "She's right," he cackled. "The only thing she'd rather do than lie in the sun is..." Just what exactly Magdelene would rather do than lie in the sun got lost in a violent coughing fit but more than one stupid grin was hastily hidden.

"I thought I'd build a house on the headland," Magdelene said firmly, shooting Carlos a look that almost set him off again. "If no one has any objection."

"Humph." Yolanda's snort brought with it another cloud of smoke. Magdelene couldn't be sure, but she thought there was a smile behind it. "Well, if grandfather is so certain, I've no objection."

The headman sighed. "Does anyone *else* wish to offer an objection?" he asked mildly. Yolanda glared at the assembled villagers who wisely remained silent. "In that case," he inclined his head graciously, "you may build as you wish, Lady-wizard."

Magdelene studied the designs she'd drawn on the bare rock of the headland then checked them against the originals in the book. Although her hair and bright yellow shift blew wildly about in the wind, the pages of the spellbook remained still and not one grain of the fine white sand she'd used for the parameters

of her house shifted. The moment Juan returned from the beach she'd be able to finish. She could have just lifted the last bit of sand she needed but the boy had wanted to help. If she let him hang around, she figured she'd eventually do something he considered worthy and he'd let her fix his arm.

She turned her face to the sun, eyes half closed in blissful anticipation of actually having a place of her own. No more travelling and no more adventures. Adventures were highly overrated as far as Magdelene was concerned, as they usually included uncomfortable sleeping arrangements, primitive or nonexistent toilet facilities, and someone — or someones — in direct and often violent opposition.

"Magdelene!"

Jolted out of her reverie, she squinted at the tiny figure scrambling up the steep path from the beach. It wasn't Juan for the child had two healthy arms he ... no, she ... flailed about for balance.

"The riders," the little girl panted as Magdelene reached down to pull her the last few feet. "They've come back."

So, the warlord hadn't taken the hint. "Don't worry about it," the wizard advised, holding a hankie to a nose obediently blown. "That's what I'm here for."

"But they've got Juan!"

"What?!" Magdelene spun around and stared down at the village, the distant scene snapping suddenly into clarity at the touch of her will. Not the same riders, but the same type, their robes of tan and brown billowing in the wind. A full two dozen men faced the well this time, a red pennant snapping about over their heads as if trying to leap from the lance time. One horse stood a little forward and Juan had been thrown across the pommel of its saddle, his good arm

twisted cruelly back.

She could see the villagers gathering—the kayle run had stopped and the seas had been too high to put out for a less certain catch. Carlos—the headman and Yolanda at his back—stepped out of the crowd and spoke. Magdelene could see his lips move although the wind whipped away the words. Juan began to struggle and squirm.

The rider's grip shifted and it didn't take a wizard's ears to hear the high-pitched scream that rose on the wind.

"Magdelene!" The little girl tugged on the wizard's shift. "You gotta do something!"

Juan went limp.

Magdelene's fingers closed on the child's shoulder and the next instant the two of them stood by the well. The child tore herself out of Magdelene's hold and dashed to her mother.

"Did you see, Mama? Did you see? We went poof!"

Alone now, between the villagers and the riders, Magdelene took a deep breath, clamped her teeth, and forced the wobbling world to steady. The last time she'd used the transit spell, she'd puked her guts out upon arrival. This time she couldn't give in to the nausea; retching at the warlord's feet might be unpleasant but it could hardly be considered intimidating. When she regained her ability to focus, most of the riders still wore expressions of combined fear and disbelief.

Only the man who held Juan looked unaffected.

He smiled down at her. "You must be the wizard," he said.

She returned the smile with equal sincerity. "And you must be the warlord."

"I got your message. I'm here to give you my answer. And," his eyes narrowed, "I wouldn't suggest a repeat of

the last incident, not while I have the boy."

Magdelene wasn't particularly worried. She could send the warlord and his men back where they came from without disturbing a hair on Juan's head. The problem was, they'd only come back. If she played to the Warlord's ego, she might be able to negotiate a more permanent solution. "What do you want?"

"You." His smile broadened, the scar that split one side of his mouth twisting his face unevenly.

Magdelene's brows reached for her hairline. "I beg your pardon?"

"I have decided I could use a wizard." He waved his free hand expansively. "You are to put yourself under *my* command."

Pompous bloody twit. He actually sounded as if she should be thrilled with the opportunity. She folded her arms and glared up at him. "Why would I want to do that?" she demanded.

"If you don't, I will kill the boy."

"And if I do?"

"I will spare both the boy and the village."

"Magdelene..." Carlos' voice sounded strained, all the laughter gone from it.

"It's all right, Carlos," Magdelene muttered out of the corner of her mouth. "I've got things under control." Or she would have shortly. A man who expected his mere presence to overwhelm all opposition could be dealt with.

"While I appreciate your very generous offer," she told him, preparing to launch a special effects extravaganza that would convince him to never tangle with *her* village again. "I'm afraid I shall have to decline."

His smile never wavered. "Pity," he said. Throwing one arm about the boy's upper body, he grabbed the small head

and twisted.

The crack sounded very loud.

Juan's body slid to the ground to lie in a crumpled heap, the head bent around at an impossible angle.

Magdelene's mouth worked but no sound emerged. She hadn't really believed he would do that. Behind her, she heard a wail of grief from Juan's mother.

The warlord's men moved forward until they surrounded the villagers with a wall of steel.

"Now," said the warlord, still smiling, "what have you to say to my most generous offer?"

The smile slipped as Magdelene raised her head and met his eyes.

"Die," she told him.

He didn't have time to look surprised. His eyes rolled up, his mouth went slack, and he collapsed forward over the pommel. Startled by this new limp weight, the horse tossed its head and shied sideways, dumping the warlord's body to the sand beside the small heap of bones and flesh that had been Juan.

In silence that followed, the breathing of the surrounding horses sounded unnaturally loud. Their riders made no sound at all, each hoping desperately that the wizard would not now turn her attention to him.

The silence grew and stretched, broken only by the sobbing of Juan's mother. Pushing her hair back off her face with a trembling hand, Magdelene knelt by the boy's body. She straightened his tangled limbs and gently turned his head until it sat naturally once again.

"Lady-wizard..." It was the first time Carlos hadn't used her name. "...this isn't to say you haven't done what you felt you had to in removing this man from the world, but..."

He fell silent as Magdelene took Juan's cold little hand in hers and called

his name.

The slight chest began to rise and fall. Juan hiccuped and opened his eyes.

"I wasn't here," he said, scratching his nose.

"That's right." Magdelene was a firm believer in telling children the truth. "You were dead."

"Oh." He thought about that for a moment. "It sure was boring."

She moved out of the way as his family rushed forward to claim him. He squirmed, looked disgusted, and tried to avoid the sloppiest displays of affection.

"Mama, stop it."

"Lady-wizard?"

Magdelene turned to face the villagers. They'd ask her to leave now. Or they'd deify her. Things wouldn't be the same. She stifled a near hysterical giggle. People so often overreacted to the raising of the dead.

"If you can bring back Juan," the headman told her quietly, "you must bring back the warlord and right the wrong you've done."

"Wrong?"

"We don't believe in the taking of life." He glanced down at the warlord's body and his lip curled. "As much as we may recognize the emotion that prompts it." Behind him, the villagers stared at her, no two expressions the same.

She heaved a sigh of relief. If that was all they wanted, they were taking it rather well. Maybe she could still salvage the situation. "But what of that lot?" Magdelene shot a glance back over her shoulder at the warlord's men who tried very hard to appear harmless and insignificant. "Cut the head off a snake and the snake dies. If I rejoin the head then the snake lives and eats the heads of others and..." She frowned, lost in the metaphor, and sighed again. "Look, I don't think it's a good idea."

"If you want to make this your home," Yolanda told her bluntly, as unaffected by miracles as she was by most things, "you must respect our beliefs."

"But he deserved to die."

A couple of the villagers nodded in agreement. Yolanda stood firm. "You have no more right to decide that about him than he did about Juan. If you wish us to respect you, you must respect us."

Was it as easy as that? Magdelene wrapped her arms about herself and thought it over.

"Does your warlord have a name?" she asked the riders at last.

They looked at each other and then down at the body of their leader.

"Anwar, Lady-wizard," ventured the young man who held the lance with the warlord's pennant. She smiled her thanks and he began breathing again.

Squatting by the warlord's body, Magdelene took his hand in hers and called. She didn't bother to make him more comfortable first.

This time, she wouldn't underestimate him.

His eyes opened. He looked around, slowly untangled himself, and sat up. "Blesnaggle?" he asked, grabbing for a blowing strand of Magdelene's hair.

She pulled it out of his hand and stood. The warlord pouted for a second then discovered his boots. He gazed at them in fascination, babbling nonsense words and patting at the air with limp hands.

Everyone, the villagers and the riders, took a step forward.

"What happened?" Yolanda asked finally.

Magdelene watched the warlord trying to catch the billowing end of his own robe. "Death seems to have unsettled him a bit," she said.

"But Juan was fine."

The wizard shrugged. "Children are a lot more adaptable about..."

"Would you make up your mind!" The dark-haired, pale-skinned young woman appeared suddenly beside the warlord, hands on hip and eyes flashing. Her black robes hung straight to the sand, unaffected by any breeze. "What are we playing, musical souls? First I've got 'em, then I don't. You're not supposed to do that!" She spotted Juan worming his way to the front of the crowd. "Hi, kid."

Juan's mother grabbed his ear and yanked him behind her, cutting off his cheerful greeting. As far as she could see, there was no one there and her baby had been involved with quite enough strangeness for one afternoon.

"Death?" Magdelene hazarded.

Everyone, the riders and the villagers, took a step back. At this point, they were willing to take the wizard's word for it.

"Good guess," Death snapped. "Now, do you want to explain what's going on around here?"

"It's a long story."

"Look, lady," Death began, a little more calmly.

"Magdelene."

"Okay. Magdelene. Look, Magdelene, I haven't got time for a long story, I've got places to go, people to see. Let's make a deal—you can keep the kid but tall, dark, and violent comes with me." She pointed a long, pale finger down at the warlord. Both her ebony brows rose as he pulled off a boot and began filling it with sand. "Now look what you've done!" she wailed, causing every living creature in earshot to break into a cold sweat. "You've broken him!"

"Sorry." Magdelene spread her hands.

"No, you're not." Death tapped one foot against the sand. "Okay. I'm sure

we can work this out like sensible women. You can keep him, just give me one of them." She swept her gaze over the riders.

One sensitive young man fainted, falling forward in the saddle, arms dangling limply down each side of his horse's neck.

"Sorry," Magdelene said again, lifting her shoulders in a rueful shrug. "They're not mine to give. Why don't you just take one?"

Three saddles were suddenly wet.

"I don't work that way." Death shook her head. "I can't take someone if it isn't their time.

"Lady?"

Both Death and the wizard turned.

Carlos stepped forward, one twisted hand held out before him.

Death's expression softened and she smiled. She had a beautiful smile. "Don't I know you?" she asked softly.

"You should," Carlos told her. "I've been expecting you for some time."

Her voice became a caress. "Forgive me for taking so long."

When she took his hand, he sighed and all the aches and pains of his age seemed to drop off him. He stood straight for a moment, his face serene, then he crumbled to the ground.

All eyes were on the body of the old man. Only Magdelene saw the young one, tall and strong, who still held Death's hand. Lips trembling, she gave him her best smile. He returned it. And was gone.

Magdelene stood quietly, tears on her cheeks, while the villagers lovingly carried Carlos' body away. She stood quietly while the warlord's men managed to get their leader onto his horse and she didn't move as they headed out of the village. She stood quietly until a small hand slipped into hers.

"I've got the rest of the sand," Juan told her, a bulging pouch hung round his neck. "Can we go finish your house now?"

She looked down and lightly touched his hair. "They want me to stay?"

He shrugged, unsure who they were. "No one wants you to go."

Hand in hand, they climbed the path to the headland.

"Are you going to stay here forever?" Juan asked.

Magdelene met the anxious look in his black eyes and grinned. "How old are you, Juan?"

"Nine."

The image of the young man she'd pulled from the future stood behind the child and winked. She shooed it back where it belonged. "I'll be around long enough."

Juan nodded, satisfied.

"So... I took you back from Death today. Can I fix your arm now?"

He tossed his head. "I'm still thinkin' about it."

The most powerful wizard in the world stared down at him in astonishment, then started to laugh. "You," she declared, "are one hard kid to impress."

TANYA HUFF, the author of twelve books and 21 short stories, lives and writes in Prince Edward County. When she's not writing she spends her time wondering why the contractors keep pointing a bits of her house and laughing. Her latest book *No Quarter*, came out from DAW in March of '96.

ILLUSTRATOR: JAMES BEVERIDGE has illustrated many aspects of the world around him from restaurants to albums, books to trucks, and helmets to toilets. He is also a card-carrying member of the cyber-set, enjoying the creative outlet muchly, though not yet addicted.

Prairie Fire MICRO FICTION CONTEST

Entry fee: \$24 (includes 1-year subscription to *Prairie Fire*).

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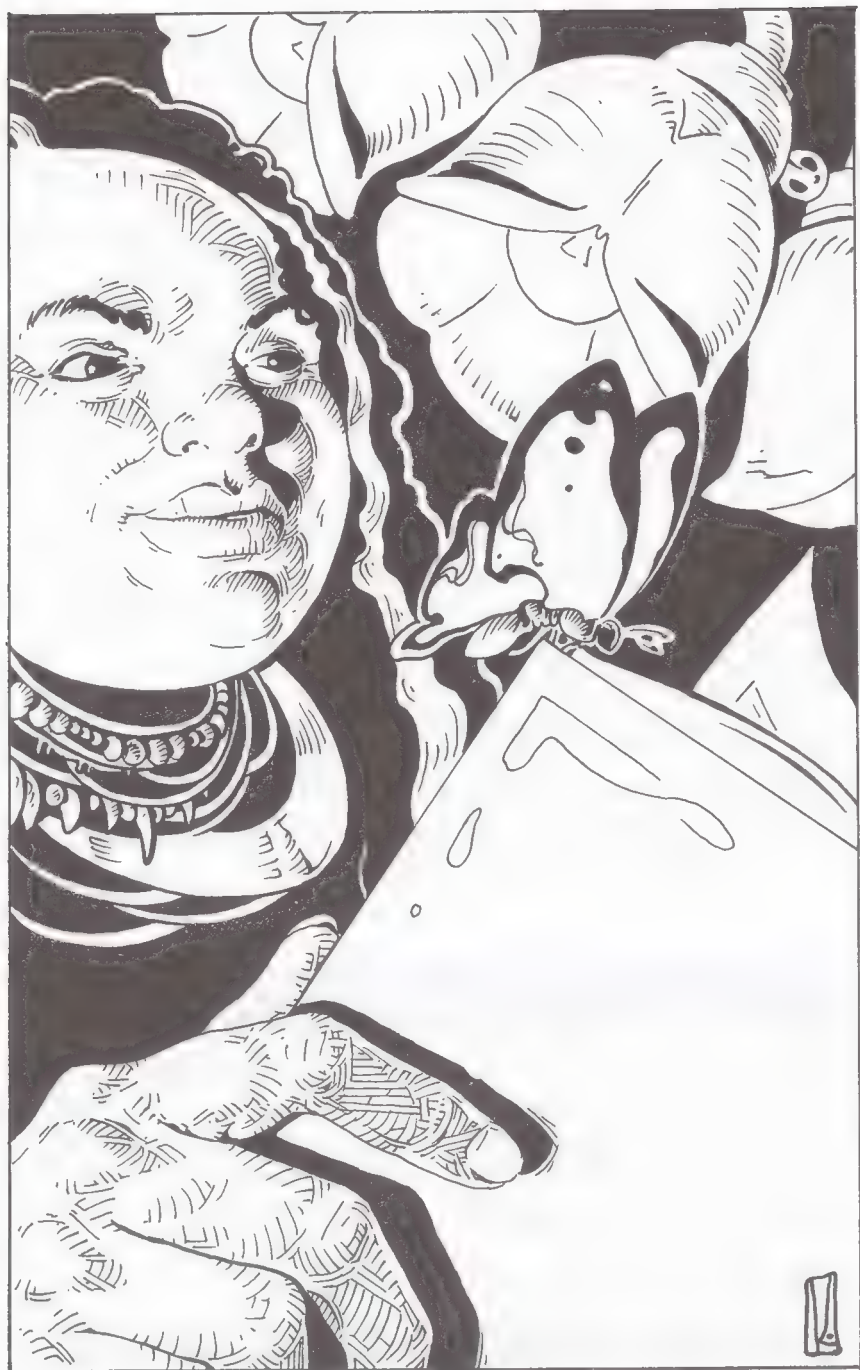
Length: Up to three pieces of no more than 500 words.

Deadline: November 30, 1996.

Submissions previously published or accepted for publication elsewhere are not eligible. • Entrants' anonymity is preserved throughout. Please include name and address on a separate page.

Judge: David Arnason.

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The Butterfly Effect

Pamela Sweeney Jackson

illustrated by Kenneth Scott

"This is called the interfusion of things."

— Chuang-tzu

Victoria Day Weekend

There is something coming. Her little head pokes out from the high neckline of her dress and strains to see, sending a quick, cautious glance past the windows of the shop.

Unlike bikini-clad Sauble Beach, West Chapel closes up before midnight even on Victoria Day Weekend—the first profitable weekend of the year. The street lights are still burning, as though left on by a concerned parent, for those unfortunate few who couldn't escape their Toronto offices early on Friday and are stuck driving to cottages at Clarke's Corners, Howdenvale or Tobermory at two in the morning. A snub-nosed mini-van glides down Main Street; in the puddles of sidewalk lamp-light the grey metallic paint and black windows glow menacingly so the thing looks like a shuttle to Mars. A couple of children drowse quietly in the back all wound up in flannel blankets and the family dog. These four are headed for East Linton. Slowly, Alice pulls her head back into her chest and intones a small prayer that they all might arrive safely.

She has lived an unobtrusive life for many years. Alice owns the bookstore—a red brick affair which blends inconspicuously into the three blocks of Main Street. She hasn't worked any miracles on the place and like the rest of West Chapel it looks to have been locked away in a steamer trunk and forgotten for a generation or two. Despite her modesty she is mildly famous—largely because she is the first proprietress to ever charm a profit out of the shop. It is generally agreed that this is due to her selling "USED BOOKS as well as NEW." The books and postcards sustain her, as do the silver-plate spoons which read "the Bruce" on a tiny color photo glued to

the handle.

Most people don't realize they've been through West Chapel until they find one of Alice's postcards lodged under station wagon seats or in an old paper grocery bag. The most popular card is plain black with "West Chapel, Ontario, at night" written across the bottom in bony white letters. Many of the residents don't find this particularly funny.

Alice is still sitting in her shop despite the hour, sipping yellow tea concocted from her Grandmama's recipe. The dregs are a weird shade of green and a close examination convinces her that it won't help the arthritis in her knees. Not all the ingredients for the potion are available in Central Ontario, but Customs won't allow the importation of grasses from her native Kenya and Alice has found substitutions from the local meadows inadequate. Still, it seems to impart the necessary energy and she polishes it off. Losing about ninety pounds would probably alleviate the pain but she has become accustomed to the extra space her hips require and the vast meters of black cloth perpetually swathed about her; eventually she might become inured to the discomfort and noise in her joints.

The moon is high and full—pale as a pearl against the profound navy night-sky. This is probably as good a time as any ... there is so much to do. With clear force of will she heaves onto her feet. Age and weight demand a pause for breath as she considers the best route. From under the cashier's table Alice draws a wrinkled garbage bag and, finally, she sets off. The door is locked behind her, although it's hardly necessary, and Alice directs her bare feet toward the Danville end of Beach Road for the walk north to the construction site.

As she goes there is a constant, soft clatter. Gold jewelry sheaths her like a suit of metaphysical armor, each ring and chain bearing a specific charm against bad luck or the evil eye or even, although at her advanced age it's superfluous, unwanted pregnancy. She wears it anyway—it's agate and it was her mother's. The euphony of her walk is known to everyone in town and children scurry behind their mothers' thighs at the sound of her approach. There are no spells she can work to allay their fears and so she feels powerless to change their minds. She's a very tall woman who often bangs her head on low doorways and the roofs of things; sturdy, heavily-muscled in her youth, although that abundant flesh has long since melted into a quilted surface of skin which is particularly abundant on the hips and belly. Her weight and skin-color make it difficult for any of the locals to accurately guess her age—they aren't used to black people in these parts. There are, however, thick streaks of startling white in her waist-length cloud of electric hair, and her hands and feet bear old callouses the color of clay. Alice smiles quite often although she turns the corners of her mouth down in the process which creates an expression easily mistaken for a prim frown. Some adults invent private, childish dares before they are able to open their mouths near her.

At this time of night the water of Georgian Bay is shiny and black. Darkness makes the sombre shore into a candy dish of ashen pebbles and boulders while bleached moonlight frolics ahead, dusting the uneven terrain. There isn't any garbage yet, hiding in and around and under the rocks. It's that particular hour when the ugly seems uglier and the scary becomes terrifying—not a

delicious, spine-tingling horror but a Cro-magnon apprehension of limbs broken on rocks in the dark, and amphibious monsters silently following—intent on swallowing you whole. Alice is unafraid on the beach but she refuses to swim here. She knows that beneath the cold, dark water the bottom drops off suddenly and mysteriously beneath the fragile, light bodies of the swimmers. During the day, the children's feet tread in white, feathery circles—generating windmill currents over the lightless underwater chasms. The canyons of the Bay are older than the monstrous, seasoned trees which crop out and encircle jigsaw-puzzle pieces of the shore. The roots of these trees occasionally seize at the frayed hem of her dress to prevent her passing and she is forced to stop and struggle, her big breasts heaving with effort and getting in the way so she can't see, a dozen shiny amulets clattering loudly on the rocks.

If she squints she can begin to see the vague shape of the billboard...

AMBROSE CLIFFS

for family ... a home away from home

She spoke perfect English when she first came to Canada but there were still so many phrases, like the one facing her, which had required explaining so she could understand. This billboard irritates her with its seeming subtle implication that those living in West Chapel can't afford real homes and are existing in seasonal shelters. Ordinarily Alice would have dismissed her version, like her inaccurate interpretations of "the back forty" and "May two four," but this time she is ambivalent because she knows the man who owns the sign and she has looked into his eyes.

Unintentionally, Alice herself plays a

word game with West Chapel; her shop is more a for-profit lending library than a bookstore. In the summer-months Alice manages to peddle every pulp paperback in the place. They leave individually or in fishy schools; stuffed into torn paper grocery bags; dropped thoughtlessly amidst sandy hairbrushes and old Kleenex in crocheted beach totes; sometimes clenched in the hand of a sweaty kid who hadn't found anyone to "hang out" with and who is now faced with the engulfing presence of siblings all summer long. These stories go for a ridiculous price, a quarter apiece for any used book in the store including poetry, although no one has ever noticed the LITERATURE section. After Labor Day Weekend the local teenagers are always hired to clean up the rental cottages, the beaches, the drive-in movie parking lot and the booths at the arcade and all these same used books come drifting back into her store, sometimes collected with others from as far away as Listowel or Walkerton. For each stray saga Alice pays the scavengers a nickel. Soon her shelves are again filled with eighteen sandy copies of *Cujo* and twelve dog-eared versions of *Crossings*. She rarely sells new books as most people are happier to re-read the same stories summer after summer. It is a scheme of accidental brilliance.

This is a cloudless night and the white-hot stars seem poised only a few feet from the top of her head, but she tears her eyes from them to look for a smoother place to walk. The gravel soon gives way to grass and her arches sing with relief. Alice thinks she has been happy here, but as soon as she rescues the butterflies she will leave West Chapel.

She walks and considers all that needs doing. The spell also works on

dragon flies, moths and spiders. The trick is being gentle with the eggs—if they get bruised there is nothing she can hope to do. Alice turns each broad milkweed leaf and finds a small white egg on the underside of many of them, tiny as a baby's tooth. Each leaf bearing a Monarch egg is carefully pulled from the plant and placed in the garbage bag. Alice is mindful to keep the bag open a little: they need the air.

She walks further, rolling from side to side like a rowboat, as the night wanes and the sound of the Bay grows quieter. She slowly becomes discouraged and clucks her tongue. She will never be able to rescue all the eggs—not in one night. The garbage bag is already mostly full and she isn't past the stand of jack pines yet. It's good she started early because it will take another six or seven nights to clear the field.

Canada Day Weekend

Ron Augustow, the West Chapel grocer, called the town meeting "window dressing" because, of course, the whole town wasn't actually sitting in St. Paul's Anglican Church and any debate on the present topic would be of little consequence. The chalky walls of the building, coated to the windows with a pelt of hairy black vines, couldn't possibly have contained everyone anyway. Several stew-bums led by "Rocky" John Merrill were digging through the local dump at the time, Pete Pitt and his sons were off somewhere on a "bender" (Alice learned this was a drinking binge), and Bob Green's wife was experiencing her typically savage premenstrual syndrome while keeping an eye on the pre-school children in the church basement. Still, those that counted were there.

Everyone attending could easily have

walked without breaking a sweat and it was, in fact, a perfect evening for a three block excursion over flat land. Predictably, there were scores of cars encircling the church, as though preventing its escape. Some vehicles had even conspired to create a shallow moat by dripping puddles of soft water and iridescent soap bubbles onto the gravel.

The children were dripping too. Although not tortured into their Sunday best they were nonetheless advised in hissed whispers to "mind their clothes". Often these warnings were accompanied with swollen lies—that if they kept clean and sat still they might be allowed play in the lawn sprinkler afterward. Instead they would all be bundled into bed before sunset to sweat, frustrated in flannel pajamas, and eavesdrop on their parents who were drinking iced tea on the back porch.

The pews of the church were already half full when Alice arrived. Like other newcomers, most of whom were Catholic, she received polite but warmed-over words from Mrs. Rev. Ken Patterson before sitting in an empty pew near the back. Two young women eventually sat next to Alice. No one seemed to know them but everyone immediately assumed they were "lezzies" because they were unkept but clever-looking women, who sat unnecessarily crushed together although they were clearly unrelated.

It was Rev. Ken's church so he spoke first.

"Welcome! Ah ... welcome to St. Paul's ... everyone. I see some new faces and of course some familiar ones." He paused; did that sound a little judgmental? Oh well, too late now. "This evening's meeting is about that exciting new project we've all been hearing so much about. I'll turn you over to the ... the man of the hour, I suppose ... our

Mayor, Tom Fortune."

Some people applauded, some didn't. It's difficult to know what not to do when sitting in a church.

Years of successful Toronto lawyering have taught Tom that the man who acts the fool is always underestimated by his opponent. He has cultivated the attributes of an Ontario red-neck to such a degree that even his wife Diane has trouble knowing when her husband is performing. Tom finds it quite difficult to look foolish in West Chapel simply because of the overabundance of genuine stupidity. He now regrets having expressed this observation to his wife on several occasions as he fears Diane's drinking is swaying out of control and she'll tell this secret, ruining his reputation. He has planned to kill her should it become necessary and eight large white bottles of Tylenol are locked in the safe in his den—just in case. A client had once inadvertently divulged that ingesting this much acetaminophen over a period of days could produce a prolonged and painful failure of one's liver. Now, standing in front of the two hundred townsfolk, the image of his wife's corpse comes unbidden to his mind—three-dimensional and in color. Everyone is warmed by Tom's dreamy smile because it's so broad and genuine, and Diane herself assumes this is because Tom practices his facial expressions before the mirror. Tom imagines her bleached hair pinned into an untidy french roll, an orange silk robe hanging askew over black panties, a made-up face drooping into the toilet bowl—perhaps with the nose broken. On particularly bad days this image cheers him and he laughs out loud. He looks forward to this event, but presently Diane is his indispensable ally; Tom relies on her innate sense of timing in situations like

these. She nods—and he begins.

"I love West Chapel as much as ... anyone." Smiles all around. They had expected that. He uses his #2 grin. "My *beautiful* wife and I have raised our children here. We think of this town as our ... extended family. But recently we have all experienced a sharp decline in income. This recession is *killing* every one of us ... slowly, painfully." Nods and noises of agreement.

People share bits of talk with one another, telling things too personal to be said aloud but told all the same, and Tom waits. He is struck by the incredible whiteness of the church, even this late in the afternoon. There is a starched quality to the paint and the people, all except Alice Akamba and ... who are those two women next to her? They look gay. Surely those weirdos from Toronto haven't come this far north...

Diane is smiling so her molars show.

"But ... Diane and I want to see West Chapel propelled into the next century on a wave of prosperity. And we know how to do it ... with Ambrose Cliffs." Broad square grin, capped teeth gleaming. Tom's shirt is so white that it reflects the irregular squares of the stained glass windows and this lends him a soft, multicolored breastplate. He counts to twenty slowly and places a hairless hand casually in the pocket of his twill pants.

"This is ... a terrific use of our natural resources. Consider our fine community bordered by a trim of cedar cabins which reflect in the cool water of our Bay. The gentle call of children, the sloosh of canoes, and ... most importantly, the ring of *your* cash registers!"

A few men laugh at that one, someone's guffaw bursts—ending in a smoker's cough. The bright words of women confide briskly throughout the little church in pretend whispers.

He waits until everyone is fairly quiet again and begins to describe what is coming. A fifteen-acre parcel divided up, and each subdivision named for a prominent West Chapel citizen—Tom sees a hopeful sparkling of eyes. (Imagine having a street named for you. You'd live forever. No need for the kids after all.) Much of it would be town houses, or "luxury suites," but some of it would be made up of private bungalows.

Conversations grow louder. (Which contractor would do what? When?) Ground would be broken in two days. Tom Fortune and his charming wife would then be hiring grounds-keepers, maids, building managers, etcetera. He pronounces it all slowly and carefully. So many jobs and they'd all go to the locals. There was that, and the increased traffic through town. Money would flow out the glass doors of the bank, flooding the roads. Sidewalks paved with gold; or at least paved. All those Toronto families; rich, blond, aloof students from the University of Western Ontario; tourists from as far away as Ottawa. All coming to enjoy their little piece of "the Bruce."

The chatter begins to reach orgasmic proportions as waves of speculation and excitement roll through the little white church. Voices are raised, hands move quickly and rings sparkle with the words, people twist to entangle each other in bright, shiny conversations.

Then one of those strange women stands up.

"Excuse me..." she begins loudly. A swell of stunned silence rolls back on itself, radiating outward and thumping against the crayon-colored windows and the rainbow puddles of light dazzling the wooden floor. (What is she wearing? Beige?)

"Excuse me. I'm Kay Gordon from the

Toronto Society of Lepidoptera, and I'm also a T.A. in the Natural Sciences Department at U of T. I'm here, with my associate Polly Underwood, because we heard about this project and we want to ask you to postpone your ground-breaking."

Tom Fortune only pauses a moment, trying to decide if he could have been wrong about this woman being gay—but why else would she wear her hair all bunched up under a hat like that?

"Ms. ... Gordon?" A small smile and the carnivorous glint of black eyes. "We can't do that. I'd lose a few thousand for every day I wait ... but, more importantly, you'd be asking the citizens of West Chapel to delay their futures ... I'm sure you can understand my, our, position—"

"This is our position, Mr. Fortune. You have neglected to consider the local butterfly population."

Someone in the back snickered and was hushed.

She continued, "Monarch butterflies are indigenous to this area, particularly Georgian Bay. Their summer courtship usually begins here, in the meadows just north of West Chapel ... your proposed building site, Mr. Fortune."

Rumbles of discontent race inward. This wasn't what they had expected. Feet shift and scuff the floorboards.

"The butterflies feed on your milkweed plants for hours and then the males perch in the sun and wait for female butterflies to go by. I'm sure you've all seen them."

People question each other. Steadfast denials—they hadn't seen them, not at the proposed building site. The butterflies would have to move. Progress waits for no man.

"Usually then there's a chase. For a few moments. Then they go to the

ground in the weeds and mate for up to fourteen hours."

That was positively obscene. Mrs. Rev. Ken Patterson blushed, indignant and flustered. Surely only a "lesbian" would say such a grubby thing. Fingers twist collars, buttons, and length of gold chain in irritation. Men examine Masonic rings and pull lint from their pants.

"The eggs are placed individually on the milkweed—they look like pearls. Then the eggs hatch. There are caterpillars. Then they transform and it is those butterflies which embark on a seasonal migration. This migration is thousands of kilometers long. Some will winter in Mexico and California, or Florida. No one knows how they manage this ... not even the experts. The Monarchs fly almost fifteen kilometers a day—" the surrounding chatter grows more noisy and Kay is shouting softly to be heard. "Fifteen kilometers a day and they travel over six thousand kilometers in a single lifetime. They're among the largest butterflies on Earth. It's all a miracle..."

Tom hears the growing discontent and raises his voice, silencing all others in the little church.

"Ms. Gordon, you'll forgive me, but what does *this* have to do with anything? The butterflies will *hear* the construction and go *elsewhere*." A mocking smile to make her look the fool.

"If you will all wait until after Labor Day it would be much better. You see, the eggs, well, the last of them, are out on the milkweed leaves right now and they will soon hatch into caterpillars. These caterpillars won't change into butterflies until nearer to September, late August maybe. Then they will leave. If you bulldoze now you will kill a large population of eggs and caterpillars and there will be thousands fewer Monarch butterflies next year."

"Look, Ms. Gordon..." Tom feels his face begin to heat around his crisp collar, his cheeks taking on the pink of frustration and embarrassment. "We here in West Chapel don't take kindly to strangers coming in and telling us how to run our town."

"Well frankly, Mr. Fortune, we don't care how *YOU* feel. If you decide to bulldoze that area—Polly and I will set up a summer-long demonstration on your Main Street so *all your* tourist traffic can see just how selfish *you all* are!"

Rev. Ken doesn't like yelling in his church and he rises hastily, waving his hands as he speaks. "I think ... I think perhaps a vote is called for?"

"Yes! Very democratic! Thank you, Ken," Tom beams.

Kay Gordon remains standing, her thin face a grimace of anger.

"All those..." Ken begins, "all those in favor of going ahead with the project, will you please ... ah, please raise your hands?"

One of the church wardens makes a quick count from the balcony of the church. It's far easier to count the unraised arms.

Kay and Polly struggle past the silent black bulk of Alice and stalk out of the church. Everyone else busily congratulates themselves on their good judgement and common sense.

The milkweed was three feet tall on Canada Day and the crisp stalks covered with wide, shiny leaves and thick cottony masses of seeds. No one went into the field to look for the burdensome eggs and caterpillars; even the children understood to stay away although usually they would be mucking around, smearing the sticky milk from broken stalks on their shorts and trapping small bugs in pickle jars. Even the huge trucks which

dismantled the field and the thick piles of smooth green lumber and thunderous machinery didn't lure them.

As promised, Kay Gordon and Polly Underwood had rented one of the small store fronts on Main Street and set up an official protest station. Hardly anyone bothered to notice it and nobody went in—not even Alice. She sat at her cashier's table all summer long, waiting. She had never explained her mission to a soul because although Alice had seen it done before she had a nagging suspicion that no one would believe her plan would work. To be sure of success, written instructions had arrived regarding the finer points of butterfly rescue from her sisters still living in Kenya. Twelve pages neatly written with a fountain pen contained infinitesimal minutia but, as with all magic, the timing which was most important was impossible to elucidate.

The ground-breaking went ahead as scheduled with no spectators present. Bulldozers curled up vast tracks of earth, piling it and all the milkweed plants into dump-trucks to be carted away, and the oily scent of diesel filled the air floating high above the town and its inhabitants. Women leaned on back fences, chatting, glad the milkweed was dug under or carted away—their delicate nasal passages were so much clearer without all those thick clouds of feather-white parachutes and flat brown seeds blowing through the air. Nearby, the men rested half-full beer bottles on their bulky stomachs and discussed profit-margins and the futile efforts of those strange women protesting downtown.

Labor Day Monday

A haze of uneasiness hangs over small towns on Labor Day weekend. The shop keepers never believe their tills hold

quite enough cash no matter how well the summer has gone. Adolescent girls can sense their hard-won tans fading with each lapsing hour, and young boys tip their noses high into the air and smell the end of baseball season. Perhaps the only people pleased by the epilogue of summer are the mothers who are exhausted from two months of childish chaos; endless requests for drinks and sandwich lunches; load after load of grass-stained laundry; hours of picking-up after husbands who begin a project only to see that it can't possibly work out the way they'd expected and then leave all the odd bits of equipment and supplies lying around on the summer porch. Only these martyred members of West Chapel are glad to see the dusk at the end of this fair tunnel. Soon the house will be quiet again, the kids will be in school, life will regain its regular shape and they will again have a few spare hours a day to pursue their own interests.

There are six people in Alice's bookstore. They wait impatiently and sweat into the pages of the last volumes to be selected for summer reading. These novels are invariably Canadian because local fiction is famous for annoying amounts of character development and plot and theme and even, most unfortunately, a symbol or two. People will read almost anything else. These six are smelling-up the place with papaya and coconut and hot lycra. The women discreetly hide their tangled manes under straw portrait hats, their sand-eroded fingernails grip fragments of Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro which they might actually enjoy. But, while they will cart these stories dutifully back to their fiercely guarded meter of beach and glance at the covers, soon they will say the sun is too bright for reading or the children too loud. Then these or-

phaned paperbacks will be abandoned in gas station restrooms all along Highway 6. The men have streaked sunscreen over their bald heads as they attempt to knowledgeably discuss the Pierre Berton they carry, even though they've never read it and are basing their assumptions on the CBC mini-series. They are squat, fat, shallow people vainly searching for squat, fat, shallow books.

Then these six are suddenly overwhelmed. Only a moment ago Alice was contented to count their many quarters and proffer unrequested receipts but now, without a word, she hoists herself up from behind the cashier's table and ignores their stares as she stalks back, back, back to the LITERATURE section which they hadn't even seen until now.

There is some shuffling and the customers look at one other. They ask themselves if one of them had said "something." No one had spoken a word. Perhaps the woman was deranged, or absentminded, or had a bladder-control problem.

She is ashamed to admit it, but Alice is upset with the butterflies; they couldn't have chosen a more inconvenient moment. It was the same sensation her Grandmama had always expressed when a cake was finished baking, even though the timer said there were ten minutes left and no one else could smell a thing. She had to go. It was time.

It was a struggle to boost the thick anthologies and old university textbooks against her substantial chest. A charm cut uncomfortably into her skin and Alice winced. It seemed she was always being startled by the shortage of romance mixed up in magic. The book covers were half off, torn and faded, but recently wiped clean for use. These were the bulkiest, most intimidating volumes

she had been able to unearth.

She emerges. The books are clutched in cupped hands, leaning capriciously and held in place with her second chin as they bounce with the movements of her enormous breasts. The six customers watch, flabbergasted, as Alice ambles by without a glance. The hem of her shadowy dress trails along behind her and polishes the wooden floorboards as she goes—creating a shiny oaken wake.

The bell on the door rarely moves because the little bronze clapper is grainy and stubborn from lack of polish, but Alice's lacy black hair snags it as she breezes by, and a modest tone signals her passing.

Finally she can stop, breathless, because she has reached the edge of the sidewalk. She can't walk any further and drops the weighty heap of books onto the concrete. This will have to do. A few dozen people are making their way down Main Street, slowly, ice cream or pastries in hand. The slimmer girls carry diet soft drinks—their thin waists clutched jealously by bronzed, skinny boy friends who will fade away like June freckles. Mothers push strollers and yell at older children not to touch, not to talk, not to ask. Fathers smoke cigarettes and seem strangely detached, looking younger than their wives as they stare surreptitiously at the pretty young things their partners once were and their daughters will soon become.

Alice is mildly confused for a moment. Everywhere the neon colors of summer solicit her focus—lemon zest bikinis, lime bicycle shorts, bubblegum pink hair bandannas. Every surface sparkles, even the trashy glass of brittle jewelry affronts her, dangling from the wrists and necks of tiny children. Nearby are tangerine convertibles with NO

FEAR and SEX WAX bumper stickers—extravagant cryptograms Alice has never bothered to decode. An abundance of color and shape; so many sizes and voices and shades of tan all moving together in a promenade of conspicuous consumption, conversation and chaos. Alice appears and, like Sleeping Beauty's palace, everything stops.

She is just so ... black. Alice Akamba is the only person in West Chapel who never works on her tan; the only one who ignores Town Council debate on the probity of thong bikinis. Alice is the only woman who hadn't had her hair cut in that whimsical new style sported by the actresses on cable—she doesn't own a television. Suddenly everyone is staring, wondering what emergency prompted her to come scuttling out of her small, dim fissure in the streetscape. She picks up the first book. Those standing nearby reach out—if she's giving it away they will pretend an appreciation of Earl Birney and Leonard Cohen. Alice doesn't reach outward, but upward.

She seems to open the book at random and, as the pages flutter in the airless summer sky, a Monarch butterfly emerges. The tissue wings which gracefully struggle outward are three inches across and dusty with orange and black pigment. The adults think this must be a trick, a butterfly coming from a book, but the children know it to be real right away and catch their breaths as it takes wing and begins to glide southward. Alice turns the page, arms stretched up, hairy armpits flash unassumingly as the sun polishes her brown shoulders. A block away at Harry's Barber Shop she almost seems to be the woman she was decades ago in Kenya—made of taut young muscles and skin like coffee beans. Alice is inspired and radiant and bewitching. Page after page flutters

lightly in her fingers and butterfly after butterfly is released into the sky.

Soon the summer people begin to talk among themselves. What is happening? What is she doing? How can this be? The only two not talking have plain faces made fair with stunned and silent laughter. Across the street stand two Toronto lepidopterists, leaning out the door of their protest center with their mouths open in wide smiles. It couldn't be possible and yet it was. Hundreds and hundreds of butterflies maintaining a life cycle despite their homelessness, incubated among sonnets and ballads and free verse.

Eventually all the books are empty but Alice is too tired to carry them back into the shop. She leaves the heap of texts where they are and crosses the sidewalk, re-entering her empty store and closing the door. The lock is quickly turned and the shade pulled but no one sees her go inside because all eyes are steadily focussed on the cloud of butterflies overhead as it heads south to never be seen again.

Tuesday dawned, appropriately enough, with a cleansing shower which lasted all day. Already miserable at the prospect of returning to school the children were positively morose because they have to board their buses in the rain, their new books splattered with a dilute acid blown here from Sarnia and Hamilton.

A small crowd of adults gathered, briefly, on Main Street. The clod of local merchants was silent, unsure of what to make of it. Either this was genuine magic or a skillful trick which produced an entertainingly baffling effect, but it was there all the same.

The door to Alice Akamba's bookstore stood wide open and she was nowhere to be seen; in fact, no one from

West Chapel saw or heard from Alice again. This was odd enough, but stranger still were the words written neatly on the sidewalk with multicolored chalk in front of the abandoned bookstore. Later there was some discussion at a town meeting as to what the words had actually said, and even more argument regarding what was meant. Someone did recall who was quoted, but no one really cared because vandalism had taken place and there was no one to discipline for it. An unpunished crime was acknowledged as a poor example to the children.

No one recognized the lines or the person credited with them. Most present that morning read it all through but of course no one thought to copy it down on a piece of paper which is unfortunate

because the rain washed the words into the gutters of Main Street, down the road, and out into the Bay.

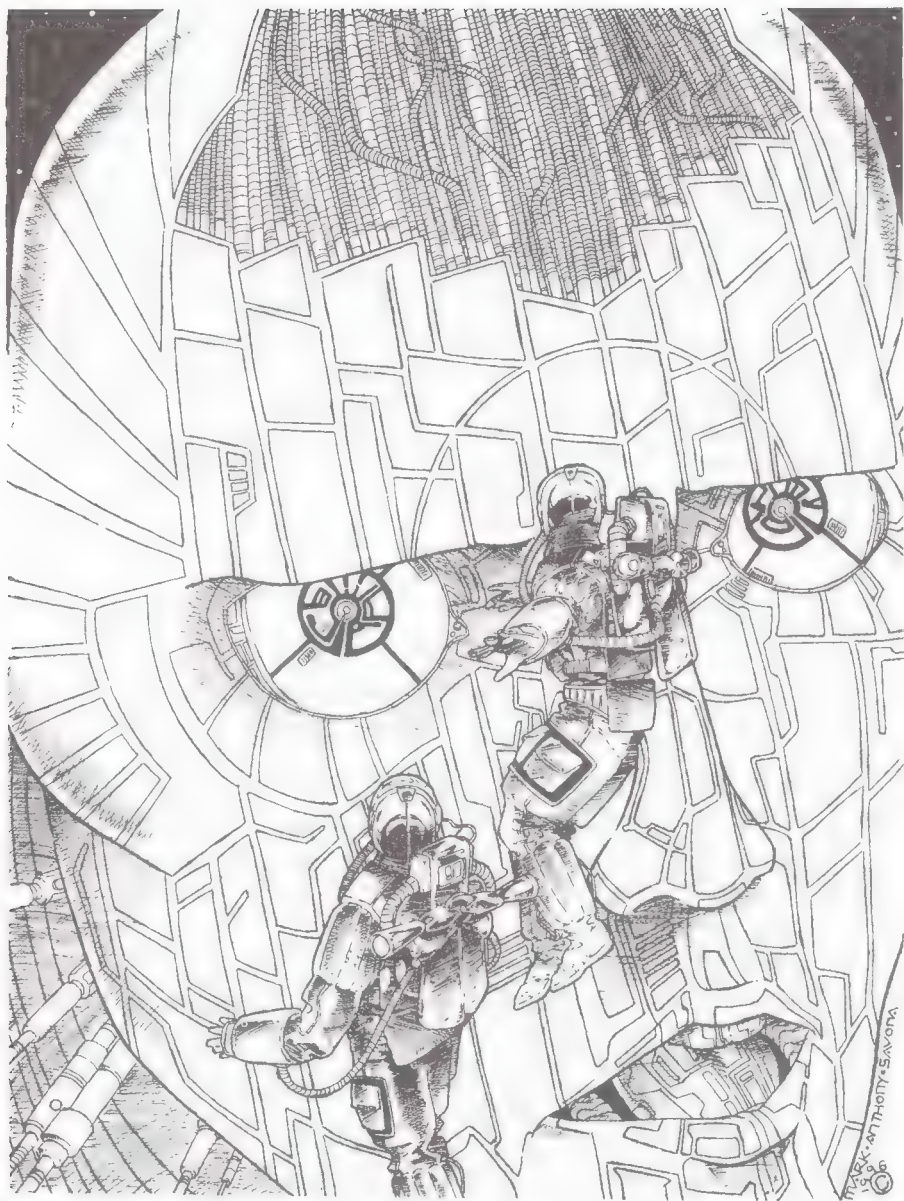
For a few minutes that Tuesday morning, just before the downpour began, the words placed in impermanent chalk read this way:

*"Once I dreamt I was a butterfly,
fluttering here and there; in all ways a
butterfly. I enjoyed my freedom as a
butterfly, not knowing that I was
Chou. Suddenly I awoke and was
surprised to be myself again. Now,
how can I tell whether I was a man
who dreamt that he was a butterfly, or
whether I am a butterfly who dreams
that she is a man?"*

— Chuang-tzu

PAMELA SWEENEY JACKSON is a short fiction and poetry writer, originally from London, Ontario, but presently living in the Maritimes where she cleans up after her husband Paul, and three cats. She has attended both the University of Western Ontario and Oxford University. Her work has been published in *Afterthoughts* and *Jones Avenue*.

ILLUSTRATOR: KENNETH SCOTT, our cover artist, has recently won L.Ron Hubbard's Illustrators of the Future contest and is appearing in Volume XII of *Writers of the Future*. He has been contributing to *ON SPEC* since Fall '92, and has received one Aurora nomination for his gloomy and foreboding cover for the Over the Edge theme issue. This is his second cover for *ON SPEC*, and he hopes to have art prints available for sale soon. Kenneth doesn't live anywhere glamorous, and plays too much DOOM. You can e-mail Kenneth at mfarr@ccinet.ab.ca



Out on the Photon Highway

Brent Hayward

illustrated by Mark A. Savona

Fingers open wide, boron sails taut between them, Asputcia swept ahead of Io, out of darkness and into the reddish light of the ancient sun. At the apex of Asputcia's orbit, Jupiter was a glaring giant—almost as bright as that distant star—and, like some huge crucifix, her shadow fell over its swirling gasses, leaping and bounding, following her home to Callisto.

She had been gone from the ice-moon for several weeks, working on a new poem, but beauty and colors and the mysteries of the universe quite literally took her breath away. Her lungs were nearly drained. Photosynthesis could not keep up with the amount of oxygen she used maneuvering and seeking inspiration.

And her stomach was grumbling.

Detecting the curve of Callisto now, set in fiery relief against the brilliance of the photon highway streaming past, Asputcia reversed the reflective side of her sails and began the long process of slowing down. Collected by the area of boron she had exposed, kelvins of energy channeled down the length of her body to her feet, where twenty meters of trailing cables radiated it into the chill of space. Letting the power that leaked from the charged cables react to the electromagnetic field of Jupiter and tug at her, she changed her trajectory.

Her receivers picked up The Diner's steady beacon. She headed towards it but did not reply, sure that Hespatus would be somewhere close, scanning for traces of her signal.

If it were at all possible, Asputcia knew that she would spread her hands to their fullest, letting light fill the webs between her fingers, and head into the photon highway forever. The song of deep space was a lullaby to her. It was certainly not duty, nor affection for The Diner, nor even love for her devoted if misguided brother that made her return time and again to the dead moon to which the three of them had

been assigned; it was hunger, and the keening sensation of breathlessness—these ancient physical binds left to her by ancestors she could barely remember—that tethered her to her dreary post.

Asputcia carefully closed her fists and swept her arms back as she neared The Diner. In her imaging monitors, she watched the orbital locked in perihelion over Callisto discover her approach; it rotated to face her, gleaming sunlight, and opened an entire side. Releasing a burst of methane from her posterior vent, Asputcia drifted into The Diner's docking bay. She was caught by the shoulders and gently pulled, head first, into a mass of thick gel.

Your brother's frantic, The Diner said as a thousand of its workers swept over Asputcia's skin, coaxing open her pores, cleaning her, scrubbing her. *There was a signal of some kind from the inner colonies while you were gone.*

The inner colonies? Asputcia was surprised. *I thought they'd forgotten about us. What did it say?*

I wasn't listening, The Diner admitted, *but it must've been important to Hespatus. He said something about court martials. He's docked twice looking for you, asking questions. He's really upset.*

Did you tell him where I was? Asputcia felt her lungs fill with fresh oxygen; the rush was like adrenaline, clearing her mind.

Are you kidding? You know how he feels about you and your... excursions. The Diner drained Asputcia's body of excess waste. Not all of it could be re-used and so was sent, frozen, to drift about the orbital's squat body. *Did you write any new poems, at least?*

Yes, Asputcia said. *Almost finished*

one. Listen:

*This life, hard light
breaks
like mercury on my skin;
this sine, cold wave
like the touch—*

A signal boomed, a squeal of angry feedback, overriding her recital.

Shit, The Diner said. *Here comes Hespatus.*

Pushing out from the bay, Asputcia executed a slow turn. The gel that clung to her skin detached itself. The Diner's manipulators reached out quickly to gather it back and draw it into its safe symbiotic fold.

Against the white sphere of Callisto, like a growing black hole, the webwork of boron between Hespatus' fingers was all Asputcia could detect of her brother's body. Trailing behind him, his cables were blazing spent energy, a brilliant red in her infra-scanners.

Asputcia! His transmission was loud and urgent. *Where have you been?*

My brother, Asputcia sent, *you wouldn't believe the sights I've seen.*

Hespatus pulled alongside her, using his posterior vent to slow his progress. *It's all over*, he said curtly.

What is?

The assignment! Command's called us back.

For a long moment Asputcia was unable to communicate. It had been almost easy for her to forget there had ever been an assignment. Neither she nor Hespatus had detected a thing on Callisto since their posting, no life of any kind, no movement other than cold winds and blown dust and tiny meteorites pounding the moon's glacial surface.

They had not heard anything from the

people that had sent them here in over four hundred years.

You would've known if you'd been doing your job, Hespatus said. *I was ready to leave you behind, report you dead. I should've filed an official communication when you first showed signs of your rogue tendencies.*

Rogue tendencies? Asputcia relayed a signal that conveyed her contempt. *How long could you expect me to watch those damn glaciers without going mad? What was the purpose of it?*

Asputcia, we had a duty here! Don't you realize that now we could both face demotion? Or even dismissal! I can't believe we're cut from the same DNA spiral. You should've been proud to serve—

But Asputcia was no longer interpreting the messages her brother was sending. Her imagination had begun to soar. She was thinking about the journey to the inner planets, and the people living there, at the command bases. She even tried to recall her childhood in the corals of Mars, but her memories were like ghosts. Nonetheless, the ideas of impending change and possible reunion thrilled her. She would go with Hespatus, but not out of any sense of the duty that he felt; she would make the trip inwards because she was curious to see those creatures again, the ones Hespatus called their superiors.

Before leaving, Asputcia docked at The Diner once more, to say her farewells.

Oh Diner, she said. *Have you heard? We're going inwards!*

The Diner made a sighing noise. *I worry about you, dearest Asputcia,* it said. *They're original humans, you know, on the inner planets. They're not like you and me.*

Of course they are, Asputcia answered, though in truth she remembered very little about the people who had raised her. *Don't be foolish. They may be the basis of our ancestry, in the original form, but that doesn't make them gods. They're nothing to be feared.*

The Diner was silent for a long time.

We'll be back soon. Asputcia tried to reassure The Diner, for she could tell how upset it was. *We'll visit you. Where else will we get our food and breath from? You're my only friend.* But as she spoke she was picturing the sights she might detect when she reached the command base. In all of her journeying, she had never considered going inwards, but now the concept burned stronger and stronger within her.

Asputcia, my dearest Asputcia, I'll miss your poems. They give me such joy, if you can believe that.

Thank you, Asputcia said, touched. *Now, Hespatus is waiting for me. You know how he gets.*

She backed out of the gel and began to spread her sails. It was time to go.

The photon highway was a series of wide, interwoven beams of light that emanated from mirrored satellites ringing the sun, stretching out past the inner planets, past Jupiter, until they eventually lost momentum somewhere near infinity. Even with joints locked, spines rigid, and skin hardened to maximum Rockwell-C, Asputcia and Hespatus had to regulate their acceleration when they sailed it. Boron webs extended to a full seventy meters across, the only limit to the speed the siblings could attain was the velocity of light photons themselves. But long before they reached that speed they would black out, organs crushed from the g-forces of accelerating. So

Asputcia, following several hundred kilometers behind Hespatus, tacked gently back and forth across the highway, furling her sails regularly to lose speed, cables blazing away kelvins.

The command post that had signaled them was at Tharsis Bulge, on Mars; the trip inwards would take nine standard days, a little less if they came close enough to Venus to use its gravitational pull, as Hespatus calculated they would.

Over the first two days, Hespatus reminded Asputcia endlessly about duty: *Do nothing stupid when we get there, he warned her. Don't humiliate me in front of our superiors. Show some respect for once.*

Eagerly sailing, and lost in the creation of a new poem, Asputcia paid little attention. But when Hespatus continued to lecture her about the anarchy that would prevail if everyone gave in to free will, and about indulgence of selfish behaviors, Asputcia was forced to close her channels in order to hear herself think.

The remainder of the journey to Mars was mostly a disappointment for Asputcia, ruined by her anger at Hespatus' lack of understanding and by the wonders she knew she had missed shutting down her communication systems.

The trajectory that Hespatus had planned brought them out of the highway as Mars was moving across the huge, red face of the ancient sun. When the planet nearly filled her imaging monitors, Asputcia changed the reflective side of her sails—as Hespatus did, a distant silhouette—and began the deceleration that would bring her to the docking satellites locked in geostasis over the Tharsis Bulge base.

As she drew close, assuming her

brother to be too preoccupied with docking and the swellings of pride to continue with his boring lectures, Asputcia opened her frequencies and searched the proximity of space that she drifted in. She could sense immediately that command's orbitals were not at all like The Diner. She scanned them thoroughly with probes and detectors—if they were indeed functioning, it seemed they were doing so on a level she had never encountered before.

Welcome, they said flatly. Link up here as quickly as possible.

She watched Hespatus promptly do as he was told: with a short burst of methane, he moved forward into the nearest orbital's docking bay.

Intrigued by these odd satellites, yet not trusting their cold stillness, Asputcia was careful to stay clear of the blind, reaching interfaces.

When she detected movement, coming towards her from Mars, she infra-scanned between the base and herself, made out two minuscule forms, a pair of slight heat traces coming closer. It took her a second to realize what these shapes were, but, registering them, she suddenly remembered others from her childhood; such small things, tending to her in the corral where she'd been born. And she recalled their odd crafts, constructions almost as large as herself that they lived inside of, in order to survive the vacuum of space. It was hard for Asputcia, as she watched the approach of these two original humans, to imagine how the gnats could have constructed an empire, let alone colonize the glorious universe and be the basis for her very own DNA!

Broadening her channels, she cycled through her range of frequencies and picked up signals coming from the forms

growing quickly in her imaging monitors.

—were they thinking? What monstrosities they bred in their paranoia! Look at those massive things! It's no wonder their civilization came to an end.

They were a possessed people. They planned to make a thousand of those monsters, loose them across the galaxy, to watch for enemies that never existed. But that plan failed, thank God, along with all their others. Come on, let's get this done. Let's free the poor souls from these abhorrent bodies.

It took a moment for Asputcia to translate what she had just picked up, another to signal a warning to her brother.

Hespatus! she called. He did not respond. On the other side of the satellite, held tight by the orbital's jaws, he was silent. Asputcia froze. She wanted to breathe, but dared not to. Her heart pumped once; a long slow throb that shook her entire body. She watched the two originals swing around level with herself, and then dart, zigzagging, over to where her brother was moored.

Did you hear something? one of them said.

No, but I'll be damned glad when this is all over. It spooks me; these infernal creatures; these flying garments.

Asputcia remained motionless. She could pick up the weak signals of the originals coming from the far side of the satellite, but Hespatus still had not responded. There was absolutely no energy radiating from his cables. Millions of kelvins were streaming from her own; the trip from Callisto had energized them to near capacity. It was impossible that her brother's energy should be gone. The originals had done something to him, had taken his power!

It was then that she heard his distant scream, a disembodied sound she had never heard before. It tore into her like a blast of light, opened her body, flayed her.

Hespatus! she cried.

No answer, only the clicking of solar winds through her receivers. Then, quietly, on a frequency at the bottom of her range, she heard Hespatus lament, *Asputcia, what have I done?*

Asputcia called out his name again, just as quietly, but Hespatus did not seem to hear her.

They've stolen my thoughts from my body, he said, and the sails from my fingers. Wherever I am, I can see my lifeless flesh, laid out in this dark cave. They've ruined me! I can't bear to know that they've done this to you too, my sister! You were so filled with life!

Releasing a short hiss of gas from her posterior vent, Asputcia backed up slowly. She detected movement; the originals were rounding the orbital's curved side, coming towards her.

This one's broken free, one of them transmitted, a tone of urgency in his signal. How're we going to get it into dock?

Asputcia could hear Hespatus still weakly transmitting a message from the bay where he was being held, and to her receivers it sounded like sobbing. The agony of betrayal in her brother's tone was heart-wrenching. He had devoted his life to duty, and in appreciation his beloved superiors had emptied his body of life like The Diner emptied a carbon dioxide-filled lung!

The two small forms were near her head now. She scanned them in her imaging monitors. The originals appeared to be attaching a cable to her dorsal receiver. Everything about these creatures, Asputcia realized, was enigmatic

to her. And she could not defend herself, could manipulate nothing here, in this alien world. She and her brother should never have come. She ached to be out in the interstellar reaches, circling Jupiter or chasing Ganymede, or even scanning the snowy storms on dead Callisto!

She was pulled towards the orbital. The two originals had maneuvered over to a platform there and were drawing her in.

No! Asputcia shouted, and with another short burst from her posterior vent jetted backwards, turning. One of the originals came with her, tethered to her back by the cable he had attached.

Help! his signal blared.

Asputcia said, *What've you done to Hespatus?*

Take it easy, now, the original answered. We're here to help you. We've ... downloaded his mind into a wetware canister. We're taking him down to the chapel with us, to grant him peace, once he has received the sign of our Lord. We're here to save you both.

Hespatus' moan filled Asputcia's channels. She knew then, by his forlorn tone, that her brother was as good as dead.

Momentum brought her through a long, slow roll. The original was still trailing from her, helpless, miniature limbs flailing.

Asputcia's charged cables struck the orbital. As she was blasted away, it blossomed behind her into a growing, blue-veined ruin, and Hespatus fell mercifully silent, free now from his torment.

Waves of energy from the explosion sent Asputcia tumbling through the photon highway, end over end.

Gradually she straightened, angled her hands in front of her, and turned in a

long arc between Mars and the sun. She was not damaged. Her oxygen levels stabilized. With thoughts of vengeance for her brother's death, Asputcia raged inside. She scanned the sandy red planet as she circled it, saw with horror the corpses of others like herself, discarded, clustered in blood-colored sunlight. Like Hespatus, they had all been emptied of life.

She swung around Mars, using its gravity to pull her. The satellite she had destroyed was gutted in space before her. Unanswered signals were being sent madly from the base below. Asputcia went through her frequencies, heard the original's plans of attack. Should she crash into the Tharsis Bulge, she wondered in her fury, rupturing the flimsy base there, killing all the originals and herself too?

No, she thought, there has been enough death.

She opened her sails to leave this place.

And then she heard her brother's voice, on a frequency she'd never used before, calling to her from very close.

Asputcia let the photon stream push her along, without attempting to move her sails or change the tilt of her cables. She was nearly out of oxygen. Carbon dioxide was not being recycled fast enough and she found that huge portions of the journey outwards were lost to her in a dark haze.

But she finally made it back to Callisto, exhausted, and thrust herself into The Diner's waiting maw.

Asputcia, my darling! You've come back! Where's Hespatus?

As her skin was cleaned, and her lungs and stomach filled, Asputcia was too overwhelmed with emotion to respond.

Where's your brother? The Diner repeated.

He's with me, Asputcia finally managed to say. Hespatus was transformed by the originals. I found him, or at least I found his thoughts, drifting through space, locked inside a tiny shell. I gathered him up and... He's with me now. Inside me. There were mysteries there, in the colonies, that I'll never begin to understand. Horrors...

Shuddering, Asputcia could not finish her story, but instead recited to The Diner a dirge she'd composed about her brother's unswerving devotion.

The Diner was quiet for a long time after, ruminating on Asputcia's words. Then it asked, *And what other wonders have you brought with you? What's that strange thing tied to your back?*

With The Diner's help—its gel linked together to form a hooklike appendage—she rid herself of her passenger.

Asputcia and her brother had come

up with a plan.

They fused the dead original's body to The Diner. Using the dorsal vents still strapped to the tiny corpse as a power source, the orbital was able to maneuver awkwardly. Then, tethered to Asputcia, it broke away from Callisto's pull for the first time in centuries, bouncing off her ribcage as it tried to control its newfound motion.

I've got it, I've got it! The Diner said excitedly, dropping back. *Oh Asputcia, my darling Asputcia, we can leave this place together!* Trail-ing her now, it bathed in the heat of her cables.

Drawing a deep breath, Asputcia opened her sails. She could feel Hespatus' wonderment as he saw the universe through her sensors. When she entered the photon highway and began to move outwards, accelerating slowly into deep space, toward infinity, she recited her latest, most joyous poem. •

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Valor

David Keck

illustrated by Marc Holmes

"It's all been made public. They had to declassify the whole fiasco."

An aging man sat in front of a wallscreen. A very young woman stared down at him impatiently, asking, "Surely you knew all this. Or at least suspected." She was a reporter. He didn't answer. He *had* heard, but only just. With a faltering motion of his thumb, he put the call on hold and stood to walk across the room. For a moment, his eyes passed over pictures of old friends, then he moved on. On a shadowed counter near the dining room table, he found a stiff loop of cable, and lifted it from its ring of dust. The end was a spiny flower of broken wire.

Locked in a wheezing armored suit, Robert Visheau trudged through churning clouds of ice, one of four living beings on a vast, alien glacier. He felt nothing like a commando behind enemy lines. His suit's limbs were packed with hydraulic rams and armor plating, so that he was forced to walk bow-legged, almost riding. With each step he had to raise his boot high, seat it in the surface snow, then lift himself forward, driving his foot knee-deep in the process. The creaks of the compressed snow harmonized eerily with the squeaking of the suit's servos and hydraulics.

For what seemed days, he and the rest of the squad had been marching over the French colony of Davout I on their way to sabotage the Zurbaran Corporation's beachhead at *La Tour*. The long-serving squad had been yanked from their bunks in a transport ship and thrown into one of the largest ice storms in history. As the boiling clouds left no stars or landmarks to guide him, Robert had spent every minute walking toward the twinkling blue filament of the inertial compass readout on his Head-Up Display. The point hovered against the storm's flawless opacity, sometimes seeming to be a distant light and at others just another of the motes on the lenses of his eyes.

He glanced at the tumbling digits of the chronometer. It had only been seventeen hours! He turned and looked to the others—Gamal Abdel-Irrahman, Jean-Yves

Prouteau, and Adrienne—where they marched in their frost-white suits. “Seventeen hours,” he said. “I can’t believe it.”

The round mirror of Adrienne’s faceplate turned toward him, but instead of agreeing she snapped, “Better seventeen hours of this, than frying on the way down the gravity well.”

Robert cringed as she walked past.

The four on the glacier were the survivors of a seven-person squad. Two had died on impact—chutes or retrorockets fouled in the furnace blast of a rushed entry. *And I’m whining about a long walk.* Robert remembered the quick search of the drop zone after their pods landed. The shallow crater had been like a scorched shore-bird’s nest. In armor, human remains had been indistinguishable from the broken egg-shell curves of ceramic and the blackened froth of insulation. Projections said that two hundred and fifteen thousand French soldiers and colonists would be spared if they succeeded. It was a case of high risk, high reward.

And they had lost platoon leader Guesclin. They never found even a trace of him, and his loss had left Adrienne in command. Robert did not envy her. She had only recently qualified for squad second, and now she was in charge of *this* disaster. He and Adrienne had served in half a dozen units over the years. She was his closest friend.

His thoughts taking a morbid turn, Robert broke the silence. “How much longer do you figure at this rate?” he asked.

“We’ll know when we get there. How would I know?” Adrienne said.

Robert wavered between irritation and empathy. “I was only wondering,” he mumbled.

Prouteau plodded past. “And how do you imagine a person could gauge distance in a whiteout like this? You can’t see a damned thing.”

Before Robert could explain, Adrienne and Prouteau were already out of range of the suits’ feeble transceivers, and the last straggler was trudging past him. Robert knew he would find no sympathy there. Gamal the Algerian seemed to be having more trouble with the snow than the others. Robert could almost see the man’s fierce eyes through his polarized visor.

Robert rejoined the march.

“I wish they could have dropped us closer,” he said, testing Adrienne’s temper.

“Right on top of the bastards!” Prouteau agreed.

“If they’d dropped us closer, you can be damned sure the Corporates would have spotted us. They’ve had time to set up infrared detectors by now,” Adrienne said.

“Just a *little* closer?” Robert teased.

“Even in a storm like this our pods would have shone like bonfires all the way down. I’d rather walk a few kilometers than get shot to pieces.”

Robert tried an awkward shrug. “I must have a terrible sense of humor. You never catch on anymore,” he ventured, but she made no reply.

“Adrienne, I was kidding again,” he said, glancing over. One point of their trudging chevron had disappeared. Robert felt a sudden panic. “Adrienne?!”

Everyone had stopped, but one of the group was several meters further back. The anonymous suit stood, leaning slightly forward. Robert squinted at the markings: it was Gamal. “What’s wrong?” Robert looked to Adrienne—glad she was all right—but could read

no sign in her visor. Just then a strange wind moaned over the ice-field.

Adrienne took a step forward, calling, "Gamal?" The tone of the wind changed, and Gamal's armored hands sprang to the golden mirror of his visor. He teetered, then stumbled backwards, his hands scrabbling desperately at the smooth plate. With hollow shock, Robert realized that the howl was not the wind. Adrienne pulled her sidearm, leveled it at the Algerian's mask and fired.

His writhing ceased.

Robert stared. Dry snow sifted over still limbs.

Prouteau spoke. "He must have lost a sealing ring."

Ammonia drifted all around them. Every breeze was tainted with enough to sear the eyes and curdle the lungs. It was locked in every flake of snow and breath of air. Robert imagined the itch and pain of eyes slowly scalding beyond the reach of fingers, and the gasping agony of slow choking. But a strong man might survive a slow leak for hours. Gamal had said nothing. Robert looked at the body knowing that, even if Gamal had *begged*, there was nothing anyone could have done.

Robert and Prouteau stood silently over Gamal's body while Adrienne reholstered her pistol. "If we succeed in sabotaging the generating station, we blast the Zurbaran beachhead. No battle. Two hundred and fifteen thousand French citizens die here if we don't."

Behind his visor, Robert glanced from Adrienne to the body. *More of your platoon is dead than alive*, he answered silently. But she was right about the numbers and, though the raid was nearly suicidal, he hadn't needed much convincing to come along. He had grown

up in Brittany, but had always believed that colonists were the best sort of people. When they weren't satisfied with their place in life, they struck out on their own. They left France behind to *build* what they needed. No one begged and no one stole, unless a multinational like Zurbaran moved in.

Adrienne fumbled with the flap of her holster, trying to shut it.

"It's all right, Adrienne. You did the right thing," he said, but she stepped back.

"All I'm saying is that we're trying to buy a lot of lives here. The cost of this raid could be very high."

It already is, Robert answered gently, *and we haven't even seen the enemy*. Between them, a delicate shroud of snow spread itself over Gamal's sprawled form. Robert ached to see Adrienne's eyes. "Don't worry," he said. "We all knew why we came."

She looked at him over the body. In the distorting mirror of her visor Robert could see his own faceless image staring back. A shout broke the silence.

"Robert! Adrienne!" Prouteau called. "Look there."

Robert turned. Prouteau stood, pointing up into the blizzard. For an instant, Robert could see nothing, but then the wind shifted and mile-high curtains of snow parted before a huge shadow. Like the prow of a monstrous ship, a pillar of basalt loomed over the ice-field, and the compass point trembled right on top of it.

"Jesus," Robert said.

"I'd be damned surprised if He ever saw this place," Prouteau quipped.

"That's it," Adrienne said, staring up into the storm. "*La Tour*."

The old man sat with a woman's picture

and the twist of broken wire in his hands while the reporter explained. He didn't think she could see him in the dark. Around him the wallscreen painted the walls strange colors as images wavered across the picture. The effect resembled firelight. "We uncovered government minutes," she said. "The way they tell it, hard times were forcing France to wring every dollar they could from their colonies, then in 2237 war with the Zurbaran Corporation and pressure from loan rating agencies brought the government to its knees. They needed cash. They could no longer wait for investments to mature. Something had to go." The girl didn't appear to hear the old man's quiet crying. He wrung the wire painfully as tears blurred her image on the screen. *Not "something"; everything had to go.*

La Tour was a twenty-five thousand meter volcanic neck, the remnant of a volcano that forty thousand years had pared down to a bare pillar. It dwarfed Everest and surpassed the Martian giant Olympus Mons.

Robert had heard all of these things in their hurried briefing, but none of it had prepared him. From the rubble fields at its foot, *La Tour* seemed larger than a world. A single black stone, the thing rose heavenward until it vanished in great wheeling eddies of wind and snow overhead. He was the last one to apply the climbing spray to his gauntlets. The granular adhesive would lend smooth ceramic fingers traction. In the interests of speed, they had decided against using climbing lines.

"There must be more snow in the air than on the ground," Robert marveled.

"We shall soon see," Prouteau shouted. With that, blackness billowed

over his frost-white armor as its chameleon surface changed, and he trotted across the broken boulders to the flank of the great megalith. Adrienne swore and followed him. For a moment, Robert was left at the base while the others climbed into the pale, roiling sky. The whole idea seemed insane, but he had no choice. "Only for the colonists," he swore, and began to climb.

"I don't like waiting," Prouteau grumbled.

"And I *still* don't like this cryogenics business," Robert added. Looking down, he could see nothing but kilometers of churning snow. They had been climbing relentlessly for forty-five hours and now, within a few minutes of the peak, they were to stop. His suit's computer squeezed another hit of stimulants through his IVs.

"If we don't wait, this whole expedition's been a waste," Adrienne answered.

"Then maybe we shouldn't have come so soon."

"If we'd dropped in a few days from now, we wouldn't have had this storm to hide in, and, by then, don't you think they'd have their sensing network completed?"

Robert did his best to shrug in the heavy suit. He could feel the generating station's titanic anti-matter annihilator throbbing in the stone of the mountain. "I didn't say I wouldn't do it; I just said I didn't like it."

"Right now they're still setting things up. They have a lot of men down, but more are on their way. In four days there'll be five times as many tanks, aircraft and starships on the ground. That's when we hit them. Any sooner and we're only stalling this damned

invasion." She paused for an instant and Robert was certain that she was remembering Gamal. "We can only pull this trick once."

"All right, let's get on with it," he said. "I've never had to use one of these suit cryogenic deals before."

Prouteau leaned close to the two. "That part is no problem." He laughed. "Just get yourself set up and I'll help you through it."

Robert looked to Adrienne for some support, but found nothing but impatience in the featureless mirror of her visor. "Okay," he said, "let's get to it."

The first step was to get a good grip on the cliff face. With a tiny chirp of servomotors, the suit's fingers clamped the rock. Once he was confident with that, he pulled down a menu from the suit's computer. The display flickered over the black stone of the tower like stitches of jeweled thread.

"Okay, now lock your suit's voluntary systems out," Prouteau said. "It'll hold you there."

Robert went through layers of menus, shutting the feedback systems down, and, in a few moments—despite the empty kilometers of sky below him—he opened his hands and let go of the rock. He let go, but the gauntlets didn't move. The feeling was eerie. He wriggled his fingers against the soft foam pads of the gloves, all with no effect—happily.

"Now it's just like a standard troopship cryo-cabinet," Prouteau said. "Make sure the medical monitoring system's working all right. It's got your heart rate and temperature?"

He checked. "Yeah."

"Okay, now get comfortable, and switch the cryo-system on. The whole thing's automatic from here on in. You just have to trust it. The toggle's in the

optional accessory menu."

After taking a deep breath, Robert triggered the process of cryogenic stasis. Abruptly, needles tugged and pricked his throat and inner thighs. He started, but the suit's rigid frame held him immobile. The chemicals had to reach every cell in his body before the suit dropped his temperature, or the expansion of the freezing fluid in the cells would rupture every cellular membrane. Quickly, it became difficult to draw breath.

A potent mixture of sedatives and anesthetics took hold, and he experienced a desperate sensation akin to suffocation or drowning. He wanted to stop, but the system didn't allow for second thoughts, and the program proceeded with mechanical resolution. Numbness spread from his fingers and toes through his limbs, reaching inward, while his throat thickened and his heart labored. The last act he managed was a strained look to Adrienne. In the distance he heard Prouteau say, "I'll see you both in a few days!"

A sound like thunder awakened Robert, and he opened his eyes to an incandescent haze. He tried to swallow, but his tongue and throat moved with the slimy obstinacy of roots. After a few seconds, swallowing seemed trivial: he had to open his throat to breathe. Urine ran freely through his catheters.

He had been thinking of nothing. There were no half-remembered dreams; there were no sensory echoes; and his short-term memory contained no traces.

The reek of disinfectant and sweat that clung to the suit's padding triggered his first real memories: the long march through the snow, the fiery descent in the drop pods, and the climb of *La Tour*.

All of it came back.

He turned to Adrienne. Or, rather, he would have if the suit's controls had not been locked out. That first motion might have killed him.

"Adrienne?" he called.

"I'm here," she said. Her voice crackled close in his headset.

Despite the persistent disorientation, Robert enabled the voluntary motion systems of the armored suit. Warning telltales flashed across his faceplate as the suit counted down. He shifted his weight to the toes of his armored boots and clenched his fingers against the gauntlets' padding, bracing himself but, when the suit suddenly sagged free of the lockouts, he felt himself fall from the cliff.

The tips of his fingers were the only bits of him that didn't come loose of the wall, and he struggled. The distant ice-fields stretched far below, flashing like a mirror in the sun. The great storm had gone, leaving the skies below empty except for the tattered wisps of cirrus clouds that hung nearly seven thousand meters below his feet. A ginger movement brought his toes back to the narrow shelf he had been standing on, and, after a shudder of relief, he crabbed over to Adrienne. "Are you okay in there?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said, "I think so," but her voice sounded slurred. "Augh, this is awful. The medical monitors on these portable units don't cut it. I think the thing woke me up before I was thawed. I've been hanging here for ninety minutes, wide awake and almost paralyzed. Maybe you were right."

"You must be half-frozen if you'd admit that."

"Even you can't be wrong *all* the time.

"See if you can get Prouteau going. I'm going to override some of these automatic controls and see if I can wake myself up. I'm supposed to be running this show."

Robert laughed and began to crab his way toward Prouteau, feeling optimistic for the first time since he'd hit Davout I.

"Prouteau, how are you doing in there?" he shouted.

Prouteau clung to the black rock almost as though he were a natural projection. Only the amber gleam of his visor gave him away. As Robert moved from hand-hold to hand-hold, he could see the distant ice-field swing beyond his friend. "Hey Prouteau, rise and shine!"

In a few seconds, he was side by side with the man. "Come on, Jean, wake up." The only sound on the cliff was the protest of straining servos and scrape of ceramic plates on stone. Prouteau didn't move. Cryogenic sleep was a precarious process, and despite synchronized timers and the like, problems like Adrienne's were common. He had heard of people losing toes and fingers to frostbite. If problems were common, with all the differences in metabolism, fat-percentages and blood pressure between individuals, delays were routine.

Robert reached out and put his hand on one black shoulder. "Hey Jean-Yves," he murmured. The globe of his own visor stared back at him from his friend's polarized glare-shield. He would have to flip the thing up. To get to the switch, he groped around Prouteau's head, but his fingers could not reach it from where he was. "Damn!" he muttered. The only option was to climb closer.

After a moment of working himself up, he sidled nearer, and reached out with his foot. His leg crossed his friend's,

and he found a foothold between his friend's boots. The movement pushed his center of gravity far from the cliff face, and he felt a queasy moment of vertigo. *Quick, but calmly*, he admonished himself. An instant of fumbling was enough to jab the button at Prouteau's cheek, then Robert swung back into the cliff face, eyes squeezed shut.

The rigid mask of Prouteau's face was a hand's span from Robert's visor as he opened his eyes. Eyelids like paraffin were parted to reveal pale crescents of white. The man's lips were dark while his skin seemed translucent over shallow bones. He was not merely frozen; he was dead.

Robert recoiled from the face, missing his next handhold in his haste. His fingers scrabbled at the rock for an instant, but he was overbalanced and already arching back over the empty glacier below. Something caught his arm.

When he looked back to the cliff, he saw Adrienne, her hand around his forearm. "His suit's cryo-system must have failed completely," she said, and with a sharp tug of hydraulics, she pulled him back to her and the wall. Robert felt a childish gratitude that embarrassed him, but made the suits seem a painful barrier as she tugged him close. He cursed the masks and armor silently, but he could think of nothing to say.

The old man stared while the very young woman spoke.

"The story that reached the press was complex enough to divert suspicion. Rumor had it that Zurbaran had found a legal loophole to justify an invasion." The woman tossed long hair from her face unconsciously, but the gesture didn't slow her down. "France and

Europe expressed official distress. Someone cut communications with the colony, and Zurbaran soldiers were seen on video supposedly pirated from the surface. France managed to supply the world press with both a villain and a victim. It was very neat."

The old man squeezed his eyes shut and swore. A spasm of anger slowly drew his hands to his chest, and he felt sharp wire catch at his shirt. For a moment he had forgotten about the loop of cable, but now he saw it knotted in his hand. With a surge of hatred, he threw it.

When the loop struck the wall, his anger collapsed. The young woman hesitated, "Sir?"

Near the top of *La Tour* the millennia had battered the ancient volcano's core. Mountainous boulders had broken free to plummet to the ice-fields far below. The peak rose like the wandering curtain walls and scattered towers of a medieval ruin.

Robert and Adrienne crouched near the top of a high cliff over a broken valley—the scar left where one great boulder had fallen away. The *La Tour Annihilator* stood a few hundred meters away.

"We aren't expected to meet heavy resistance, but our intelligence is aging fast, so who knows?" Adrienne said.

"I wish they could have thrown a couple of cruise missiles at the damned thing," Robert snarled.

"You're not the only one, but that thing's under fifty meters of reinforced concrete. A conventional missile big enough to knock it out would get nailed by their anti-missile gear, and God knows what a nuke would do to anti-matter."

"Do you think the two of us will be enough?"

Her response was considered. "I think so. You know as much as I do. Each of us has the field disruption program in our suit's computers, so either one of us could download it."

Robert felt a thrill of apprehension. The idea of disrupting an antimatter containment field was like sacrilege. It had been a science fiction nightmare since before anyone had ever built an annihilator. Still, he could not object—not to the mission's objective—not then. He offered another qualm instead.

"Screwing up the field might not be tough, but slipping through the guards to get to the controls solo could be ... awkward."

"Well then, you'd better be careful," she said, and patted him on the helmet.

Adrienne took the lead, clambering to the brink of the cliff. After peering over for a moment, she ducked back down. "I see only a few guards," she said. "A real rag-tag bunch. Looks like they're wearing scavenged gear ... Zurbaran must've hired mercenaries for this one."

"Pigs," Robert snarled. Where his squad took huge risks for the people of Europe and its colonies, mercenaries usually took few risks and fought for money. They favored an unfair fight. Robert imagined the tiny colonial garrison that would meet the attack if he or Adrienne didn't succeed. They wouldn't stand a chance.

Still over his head, Adrienne nodded, and looked back over the ledge. Robert prepared to follow her up.

As he set his hands on the rock, he heard a scrambling from above. "Shit," Adrienne grunted flatly. She was trying to duck back down under the lip of the cliff, but she had lost her grip. She fell.

In an instant, Robert had freed a length of climbing line and was preparing to throw its adhesive grapple for her back. She passed him flailing wildly. "Adrienne!" he shouted, but then the line jerked tight in Robert's fingers. Ten meters down, she hit the end of the cable and swung heavily into the cliff face.

The thin cable whistled as it sped through his fingers, scouring a spray of silica from his gauntlets. With an adrenalized twist, he wrapped the line around his arm, catching the small adhesive grapple at the very end and making a knot.

At the bottom of the line, Adrienne hung from one forearm. He had missed her back, but the metal lump of the grapple had caught her arm. The chameleon surface of her armor pulsed wildly, like some chemist's experiment. Waves of color washed over her body like flame; the only constant the golden bowl of her faceplate. Her suit was badly damaged. Robert began to haul on the line.

"Shit, Robert, I'm sure they saw me. I had to duck fast. We've got to get out of here." Hanging awkwardly, she reached for the grapple with her free hand. It was then that Robert noticed a strange flash of white; almost invisibly, a thin plume of frost was spouting from her side. His eyes flashed wide.

"My ears!" Adrienne's voice crackled in his helmet. "I've sprung something." He hauled, and she worked. "Augh! It's not resealing. I'm losing pressure." Robert heaved on the cable, pulling and looping the line over his shoulder with mechanical speed. But the line slipped, and Adrienne dropped back to nine meters.

"Robert, they saw me."

He pulled.

Before he had managed more than a few tugs, the plume sputtered out. "I can hardly breathe," Adrienne gasped. Her free hand scrabbled at her faceplate. Robert bit his lip. The mountain top's low pressure would be peeling the moisture from her eyes, and ammonia might have replaced her lost air. "We've got to... It's too late. Robert, you idiot, you've got to hide. There's no time."

She coughed raggedly, as he pulled her higher. "I've sprung a seal! I can't..." she protested, but there was no way he was going to let go, and he kept pulling.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said.

She tried to gather her breath, then she gave up and wrestled her sidearm out of its holster. "Stop!" She raised the pistol, and its target-painting laser licked out, flickering over his suit. He hesitated only for an eyblink. *She won't shoot me.* Then, for the shortest of instants, the target-dot lit on the climbing line, and she pulled the trigger. He was left with a ring of severed cable.

The old man stood at the wallscreen in silence, with the cable in his hand. He shut his eyes and turned the loop, feeling the coiling ridges and rough spines.

The very young woman pressed on. "So, in what was really a desperate gamble, France quietly sold the rights to the Davout colony to a multinational: Weiss. A totally neutral party. The press had no idea it was coming. They blamed Zurbaran. Zurbaran had been in conflict with Europe on and off for years. But the colony heard rumors, and they got angry. A multinational like Weiss was going to be worse than France had ever been. Rumors of the takeover angered the already disgruntled colonists, and they rebelled, taking control of large

sections of the planet. Weiss pulled out. They wouldn't buy. Europe was desperate. Already balancing a crippling debt, France couldn't afford to lose Weiss's money and the colony's mines. A raid was quickly organized."

The old man shook his head.

"The French military sabotaged the new *La Tour* anti-matter annihilator, saying they were stopping an invasion. There was no invasion."

The old man murmured, "*Oh Adrienne,*" half-surprised that his lips betrayed the thought.

"The scheme was a real classic. Zurbaran had never heard of the 'invasion'! And Weiss was waiting for France to quell the uprising before they would even *think* of moving in. The blast was more than enough to do the job. It released enough energy to stop the revolution where it stood: the single largest man-made explosion in history."

The old man remembered darkened hallways and curiously slipshod guards. It had seemed as though they hadn't known what they were doing. He remembered tears and adrenaline as he fought his way to the annihilator's control center. There had been a private shuttle on a landing pad. He remembered the elation he had felt as he raced away to ride the giant fireball, the shuttle disintegrating around him. He remembered the burns and his hero's welcome, and how it had hurt not to have his friends with him. Adrienne had been the real hero. Robert's face had been on the net, but, without Adrienne's sacrifice, he could never have survived to sabotage *La Tour*. No one had really listened.

The feelings were ghostly now—shadows. *Adrienne!*

The young woman did not even see the shadows. "Weiss was upset at the

damage, sure, but they were glad to have the world. Better still, France had pinned the whole thing on Zurbaran. No blame. No one heard of the revolt; the press had been supplied with heroes and villains. Two months later, a 'generous' Weiss offered to buy the rights to the crippled colony from the grieving European people.

"So," she said, "We felt that you should have a chance to—"

With a clumsy gesture of his thumb, the old man cut the connection, and stood straight-backed, facing the blank, glowing screen almost without trembling. The crystalline wilderness of

Davout I, with its empty skies and flashing plains, stood before him. After a few moments, his stiff frown buckled and he looked down at the ring. He turned it in his hand for a moment, then reached out and shut the screen off.

For a time he stood in silence with the ring in his fingers, then, with a long inhalation, he straightened his back once more and walked across the darkened apartment to his gallery of photographs. It was with careful solemnity that he set the ring down, returning it to its place on the shelf. A tear followed the creases of his face. •

DAVID KECK has done a little teaching, fringe acting, standup comedy, ha a Bachelor of Arts and (any minute now) a Bachelor of Education. He is currently living in Winnipeg.

ILLUSTRATOR: MARC HOLMES: Mr. Holmes continues to confound the criminal element of Greater London with his uncanny powers of observation. In his spare moments he investigates the Art of Painting.

Ghost

Fiona Moore

Why have you returned
long after the coroner's report went in
to haunt the midnight airwave?

Was it to fill the void
in the sponsor's pocket?
in the late-night lineup?

Or to atone for a promise
unfulfilled—six seasons stated
in the contract, five completed?

Who has condemned your ghost
to forever repeat the actions
that made you briefly famous?

All you are now is images
perpetually flicking back
over an instant in time

And yet even the images
went into the contract
that gave you half an hour

a week of fame.
You should have read
the fine print more closely

Or at least you should
have known enough to sign it
in *someone else's* blood. •

FIONA MOORE lives, studies, writes and occasionally works in Toronto. Her poems have appeared in numerous small and semiprofessional publications; several should be published in an Insomniac Press anthology at some unknown future date.



The Burn

Dan Rubin

illustrated by Peter MacDougall

You serve, you bow, I know that's what they say. Even shifts in the PZs don't drag me down. You serve, you bow. But this looks like a whole different trip.

As soon as I meet him, I don't like him. This guy is a real tweebe. Like, from before the before. I can just tell he'll have something to print on me, something he considers real important. I can hardly wait. But service is service.

He steps out of the tube, flashing his cred, nervous, like he's moo at the zoo, or something, too tall to be real. I'd heard pre-splicers were big. But I'd never really seen one before.

On the Outer Islands, where I was raised, our oldies aren't like that. If I hadn't seen it, I couldn't even project it. Give you a kink in the neck, just to talk with them, if they were all big like that.

I look up, flash my cred back, so he'll know it's me.

All of a sudden he grabs my hand, pumping it up and down. I pull away and wipe it on my pouch, thinking, this guy is really outside. No one makes contact any more. Unless you're transmitting.

"Easy," I say, "We're doin' service, not splicing genes."

He smiles then, he actually *smiles*. Now I'm sure I don't like him.

Behind him, a flock of wings is leaving the tube station. With their identical black shoes, hats and capes, they come on like those extinct birds they admire so much, moving in unison, wired to their trace, heads going up and down in time to the beat. I almost laugh. But you don't laugh at wings, or clomps, or any of those flocks.

He says, "We should get oriented," as if I don't know my service.

"Yeah, right," I respond. "You want some nutros, maybe?"

He pauses to consider it.

"Yes, certainly."

I think of places at this end of IsCity, but the only one that comes to mind is Pags, a kind of franchise joint that sells synthetic eurofood. All the really nice places are clustered around the Oakbay tube junction. Here at Midvic there's just a Pags and a couple of Macfoods. Oh well, Pags, I guess.

I motion toward the exit. He follows me uptube to the business level. We find this little place with privacy booths, ten loonies an hour, plus your eats. He seems surprised when I ask him to put in half the coin. I think, where is he from, anyway?

"You scan all that stuff, about the burn?" I ask him as he looks over the menu on the booth screen.

"What is this?" He taps at the screen.

He means the tempus, cheapest thing on the list.

"It's, well, reconstituted. Imitation cluck, you know."

"Yes, I know," he says, and sighs.

This is great, I think. I get to play domus to some tweebe while trying to complete a shift on this burn that's supposed to require all kinds of presence and hardware.

He settles on the tempus with soy cheese. I go for a malt-n-mash. We punch in our orders and get down to details.

"The main groups are hanging around stream beds in these little camps."

He nods.

"We've contacted most of them, and some are already coming in. The rest get a last chance to move, before the burn crews head out."

He nods. Seems like he's lost in transit.

"What did you do, before the Change?" I ask, hoping to draw him out.

"I was a ... teacher," he says, as if he's

not sure I'll even know what that was.

"Sure," I reply, "You transmitted stuff, in a school, or something."

"Yes, that's right, in a university," he says, brightening a bit, brushing hair at least ten centimeters long back with a thin hand. "Sociology. I got my degree ten years before the Change."

"Must have been hard," I say, trying to be sympathetic, "Before everyone got wired, and like that."

"It was ... different," he admits, looking around as if he's afraid someone may be listening and he might just say the wrong thing.

"Privacy, ace!" I tell him, letting myself smile, banging on the foam walls. "No see, no hear! That's why we shove the loonies in the slot y'know."

He relaxes a bit.

"You can call me Edward," he tells me.

"Well, Eddo," I say, "they call me Threefer, on account of I was in the first batch out in thirty-four."

The nutros arrive then, sliding down the slot onto our table, and I can tell by the way he eyes his tempus this is pretty weird for him too.

"The forest cover is already kind of thin, being third growth." I continue, "but there's still some areas to hide in, the stuff along streams, and wildlife stumps they left standing when they cut it the last time, back in the nineties. So we have to work our way upstream, and find any of them that are hiding back in there."

"What do we do if ... if they won't come in?" he asks.

I just stare at him, then.

"What do you mean? We leave them there. What the dirt can we do about it? It's their necks. After the burn, there won't be anything left. It'll all be smooth as this tabletop, terraformed

and everything. Won't be any place for them."

"So, do they just get, uh, terraformed, too?"

"Well, I guess so. It's their right, you know. The charter says we can't make them move. If they want to turn into landfill, it's their right."

Doesn't seem like he's really interested in his food. I watch him stab the tempus over and over with the thin end of his plastic chopsticks.

"Look, Eddo," I tell him, "it's not on your cred. The thing is, you're the gofer on this team. I'm the sensei. Sorry to be blunt. But that's the reality."

"I know. I'm glad to have this chance," he tells me. "I just wish it were something a little easier."

"Well, you could be cleaning carts in one of the Protected Zones, getting ordered around by third generation oreos, but myself, I'd rather have one last flight over the trees."

He doesn't seem to want his tempus. We leave the place, and tube over to the field, where our crew is meeting. I go over the matrix with him, to make sure we won't look bad at the briefing. He seems to get it all, how the burn will move the treeline back up the mountain, and how the resettlement areas for the outies have been set up. He seems to get all that.

We arrive in time to grab some hot quaf from the lunch line before it closes, then file into the briefing room along with the rest of the servos.

Yamaguchi is already there. We call him Yamo behind his back, but in front of him it's always Yamaguchi-san, with the appropriate little bow, and all. I notice Eddo is humming, not singing along with the company song, so I nod at him as we sit down, and whisper, "You'll get it."

Yamo smiles down at all of us.

"We please connect now."

Why, after all these years, supers and heads can't at least deal in common Engslang, just beats me. It's one of those little irritations. If I were a clam, or something, I'd be spitting pearls. But I'm just a servo, so I shut up and bow.

Eddo is having a little trouble with his terminals, so I reach over and wire him up. He tenses as the plug connects. The socket behind his right ear is surrounded by fresh scar tissue.

"New?" I ask.

He nods, and smiles at me. I look away.

As we sit, absorbing the input from the holostim I think of my family out on the Islands. I guess it was hard for me too, when I came over here. Island City, or IsCity, as everyone calls it, is so different from the natural areas, that it is a bit of a shock at first.

I remember climbing aboard the hovercraft that first time, after years of staring across at IsCity, the bubbles and tubes shining in sun. Shading my eyes against the glare, I could make out Midsland cluster, which used to be Greater Parksburg, and the tubeways running up to Disney and over the pass toward the Western Coastal terminus.

It was hard to leave the clan. The rest of my sibs had gathered to see me off. The other three had opted for residency. Dressed in their overalls, orange protective sunhats and communicators, they had walked in from the fields out beyond the Teapot corner.

"Don't join any flocks," someone yelled, joking.

"Get plugged," I shouted, full of adrenaline and excitement.

"You're the one getting plugged," one of the elders had said, tousling my hair, which was still shoulder-length.

Then the horn sounded, and it was all aboard.

These days, when I'm off shift, and back home, it's never the same. I know I'll be accepted as I am. Outlaw Islanders always are. But underneath I have to admit I feel different. It's not something I like to think about.

The program wraps, and I look over at Eddo, wondering where he came from, and how he arrived here, with those fresh sockets behind his ear and that look of confusion spreading all over his long worried face.

Yamo smiles, and looks around the room in his fatherly way.

"Questions?" he asks, as if there will be any.

Suddenly Eddo has his hand up. I feel like shouting at him, but I just grind my teeth and try to shrink down into the padded seat.

"What do we do, if they won't come in?" he asks, all genuine and naive, as if we hadn't had our little talk at the Pags.

Yamo nods and smiles, seemingly unperturbed, but I notice that his hands have formed fists, behind the polished wooden lectern.

"You must practice restrain. A sense of balance. Things must be as they are. Neh?"

Eddo nods, then asks, "But do we just leave them there to..."

Yamo is not smiling as his fist comes down once on the lectern.

"Acceptance is order," he says, and I find myself mouthing these words, as if I were back in training.

As we file out one of the other servos takes me aside.

"Where'd you find the stilt man?" she asks, but without malice.

"Down at the tube station, where'd you think?" I say, still stung at the attention Eddo had generated.

"Yeah, but how did he get selected?"

"I don't know," I have to admit. "I'll check it out." I look around to see if anyone else is listening.

"Better keep an eye on him," she advises.

I nod, thinking about the rest of us onshift, and the way the heads deal with irregularities. No point in making a big deal about it, but I'll have to have a talk with him.

Our shift is the next day. I had been thinking of spending the night in my cube, playing zonewar on the net with a friend who lives over on the mainland. It will just have to wait. I catch up with Eddo as he steps onto the downway.

"Eddo," I say, trying to sound all friendly and relaxed, "what are you planning to do until we're onshift?"

"Drop in up at Bungeytown," he replies.

At first I think he means it. Some people like to spend hours bobbing upside down in a tube. Then I can see yellowed teeth as his mouth splits into a grin.

"No, really, if there's something you would rather do..."

"That's very kind," he says, turning to face me, as the sliding stairs roll us down toward main level. "Actually, I have to stop along the way to check on my boat."

This catches my attention. Boat is one of those words you don't hear any more, unless you're an islander or some wealthy crust who can afford the credit to spend whole days skimming up and back across the Strait.

"What kind of boat?"

His eyes are distant as he describes it: three-masted, made of wood. It must be a real antique. The only wooden ones I have ever seen were sitting in some dehumidified display case down in

Museumworld.

"Does it ... do you ... free sail?" I was thinking of a charter I ran once, with cargo for the mainland, a sailing barge riding the northwester. Sure it sailed, but always on course, steered by the autocompass, reading GPS, conned by traffic control down in Van somewhere.

"You mean, can I sail wherever I want to go? The answer is yes, as long as I verify my position while I'm in inland waters, and as long as I don't mind living without credit, which has its limits these days."

The idea of free sailing fills me with an odd spinning sensation. I can see why he might be strange.

"How far have you sailed?"

"Across the Pacific in '98, then back the following year. I left for the North the year after the Change, so I guess altogether I was away for thirty years."

"Why did you come back?" I ask.

"You mean, was I lonely? Not really," he says, as we step onto the platform that leads to main level and the upisland tube station. "The fish began dying. I couldn't stand eating the ones with sores that were left after the scoopers came through. And those fish in the farm nets, they taste strange, so I never ate those. It must be all the additives in their pellets. Finally the garden wouldn't make it under the ultraviolet. You know how it goes, modern history, right?"

"Over on the islands, where I grew up," I tell him, "My sibs still run a farm."

"Well, I imagine they use varieties that are spliced, to withstand the uv. I was cut off, couldn't get those. And even if I could, they won't grow without this season's additive in the weed-and-feed."

"Where is your ... boat?" I was having trouble even saying the word, which brought to mind stories from my childhood about the old ferry, and the

fishboats they used to build at the boatyard in Scottie Bay.

"It's tied up just inside the reserve lands, MidIsland, next to the tunnel entrance. There's a depot that loads recyclables for overseas transport, and I dock there sometimes."

The reserves are the bits of land they gave back to the natives. They operate as separate economic zones, producing little for export, but jealously protected by the band councils and tribal overlords who rule them.

"Sure," I say, to my surprise. "Let's go see your boat."

Down by the water the mist is settling, tangy with salt and acid. As we walk down through the industrial sector. The transport tubes loom overhead, and the hum of pods entering the tunnel is pretty loud, but somehow it reminds me of home. Maybe it's the ocean smells.

At the tribal boundary, we follow a chain link fence. There is a gate, with a sign that says "MidIsland Tribal Council, Ltd." I start to flash my cred, but the man sitting placidly in the gatehouse just waves us through as soon as he sees Eddo. Past the gate the road becomes a narrow path leading through a grove of maples down to a loading dock.

The boat turns out to be a thing of beauty. It's like a fish, or a bird, or something, all made out of curves. None of this modern hard-edged stuff. Her name is carved on the bow: *Northern Wind*. I run my hand along a railing and step onboard.

Eddo disappears into a cabin to check on something, and then beckons me in. Down a couple of steep stairs and we're in this little room, like something right out of Museumworld. It's old, for sure, but clean down there. Books, actual paper and cloth books, nest behind a rail, and there are lamps that shine

warmly when he throws a switch, and the pleasant smell of oil and wood-smoke.

"Do you actually burn stuff in that?" I ask, pointing at the small black stove that huddles beside the steps where we came in.

"Yes. Wood and paper, and sometimes other things, if I have to," he says, "but wood smells the best."

I feel a little sleepy, as I do when I have just made it back to the Rock.

"Home again," I think, then realize this isn't home at all, but someone else's floating world, a piece of the past that somehow drifted in.

Eddo is all smiles. He rummages around, and finds an old monochrome photograph, tattered and worn, but still clear, inside its laminated plastic coating.

"These are the people who built her," he explains. "They were in their seventies when she was launched."

I know people used to live that long. I guess there are some old supers who are just breaking in their third hearts. But for most of us servos, it's hard to imagine being around that long. I just nod.

A little while later we're both sipping tea, and the cabin is warm, with a heat that gets right into your bones, and I feel the boat rocking slightly in the wake of some big transporter passing through the harbor and out into the Strait. The lonely moan of the foghorn comes low over the water.

The fog is a killer on nights like this, all acid and heavy, and it kind of sticks in your lungs. I am glad to not be wandering out into it yet.

We talk for a while, and I tell him about growing up out on the islands, and how strange it feels sometimes to not still be with my clan.

A brass clock on the wall chimes four

times, and I realize it's midnight. Almost time for us to suit up and head out.

"Look, Eddo," I say, "I know it's a little weird for you, but it'll go way easier for everyone if you kind of keep your mouth shut."

"I find that a little hard at times," he says, his eyes vacant.

"I know, but take my word," I say. "It won't help, and it will just get the rest of us into dirt."

"Come on," he says, and we climb up out of the cabin. He checks on the sails, which are gathered into bundles by lines coming down from the three slanting masts.

"It's a junk," he says. "The rig is originally from China."

"Nobody says that any more," I remind him. "It's all part of the OTZ, the Oriental Trade Zone."

"Whatever," he says as he checks the lines holding the boat safely at the dock. He turns and stands looking at her for a long moment, then we set out through the mist, holding one arm in front of our faces to screen the worst of it.

Back in the tube we're both silent as we ride along.

After seeing the boat, he is less of a stranger to me. If I had been out where he's been, all alone for all those years, I'd probably be even weirder than him.

Once I was marooned on that island where all the wild birds used to live, north of here. Took a week for me to flag down another supply barge as it went sailing past. In that week I guess I learned some things. Couldn't tell you what, but I know I was different when I left there. Lighter or something. Can't imagine what thirty years of being alone would do.

We reach the launch base, and climb into our power suits. I help Eddo with his suit, and jack him into his com link.

Then we file out onto the field where the choppers are waiting .

From the air, it's like looking down into a bowl of noodles. All the tubes and shuttle routes interlace, leading north and south, meeting at MidIsland dome, where other branches lead west, over the pass toward the big reactor stacks at Albarni. Out that way it's clearer as we approach the pass, then turn south, and suddenly we're over the tree line.

I remember once seeing a vid made before the Change, when this was actually part of a country, instead of a trading block. The island was full of trees then. Back in those days they had so many, they couldn't wait to cut them down. Had people who spent all their time doing it.

Now, unless we need wood for some special little thing, a tokonoma or a ceremonial staff, no one thinks of trees as a commodity. They're just growing out there, part of what we call "outside."

And periodically, we have to clear more away, to make room for housing or production.

So that's it. The burn. Hard to believe, but there are still people living out there: the outies. Some of them have been out there for a long time, and they have children and everything. Not spliced, just born.

We're on our way now, so I hope we don't find many.

Our landing is easy, right below the trees on the western slope, beside the shore of a silent lake. The chopper drops me and Eddo. We seal our suits and check our com line.

"Threefer, are you there?" he asks.

"Where else would I be?" I say, keying the transmitter with the chin switch, while I adjust the magnification and night vision on the helmet.

"This is going to be hard, isn't it?" he

says.

"Nope," I tell him. "You just follow me, and let the optics do the rest.

Together we make our way toward the tree line, Eddo a little shaky as he tries out the amplifiers in the suit hydraulics. Power suits are always a little bongo the first time out.

The camp is betrayed by the lingering heat of a cooking fire, glowing purple on the head screen against the normal blue of night vision. I turn on my main headlamp, and we are greeted by screaming children and adults cowering in the intense light of our lamps, as we enter the camp.

I turn my amp up to nine and key it to external.

"You have the right to seek safety, and to protect yourselves, according to the Charter of Rights. We are employees of IsCity Central. This area will be resurfaced within twenty-four hours. Please collect your things and assemble at the lake, where you will be picked up for transportation to your relocation area. Family groups will be able to remain together, but you must move now."

"Threefer?" I hear over the intersuit channel. "Why are they still here? Haven't they been warned?"

"I think so," I tell him. "All these groups have been contacted. But they never seem to move until it's time."

We are working our way up a slope, using the thin stems of young alders to power our way over the rocks and debris, pushing through big shiny leaves and berry vines. This must have been one of those areas they tried to regenerate over and over. The thin soil and stunted growth tells the story. Still there would have been some food here, for these little bands of outies.

Over the ridge, and down into the next valley where it's a whole different

landscape. The trees are huge, and even the undergrowth is widely spaced. We move more easily. Then I've lost Eddo, so I stop and call him. It takes two tries before he responds, his voice sounding faint.

"Where ... are ... you?" I ask, trying to make sure he can copy me.

"I'm down here, beside the stream," comes the reply. "It's so..." Then he fades out.

Oh great, I think. Never a dull moment.

When I get down there, he has his helmet off. I just hope I can get him back into it before someone scans us.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

I can't even hear him, so I have to unlatch too.

The smell of the forest is rich and strange. I come over to where he is kneeling at the foot of a huge tree growing beside the little creek.

"It is a giant," he says, "a giant among giants."

"Great," I tell him. "Put your helmet on now."

"Threefer," he says, turning toward me, silhouetted in the green light from his headlamp, which is shining down through the moss beside the stream, "would you leave this place, if you lived here?"

"It depends on if I wanted a hot shower and some nutros," I tell him, trying to ease him back into his suit. "C'mon, Eddo, we have service to do."

"I've never seen trees like this," he says in a voice which is dreamlike and husky, "even up north."

"Well great," I say, starting to get worked up. "I'll see if the burn crew can save you a piece of one, now let's get going."

I snap my suit shut, key the transmit-

ter and stand back, waiting for him to do the same.

But he doesn't. He just stays there. So once again, I have to take the helmet off.

"Eddo! This is serious. If some super scans us, we're can clones. We can't stay here. We have one more site to make, in less than an hour. Then it's pickup, back by the lake. Let's go."

As he sinks down into the moss, I find myself trying to pull him up, but with the suit power off, he weighs too much. When I look up we are in the middle of a circle. A whole tribe of outies with their strange bark robes and long hair are standing around us.

I just freak. Maybe it's the smell, or maybe all those stories you hear in the crèche when you're young, about outies eating babies and all that. It's pure reflex. The helmet is back on, and I'm gone.

Powering through the circle, I knock one of them down, a female with startled eyes. I think with disgust of the process of conception actually going on inside a person, and am glad to be free of this ring of half-human dirty figures.

At the top of the slope I stop and turn. I can see the figures have surrounded Eddo, and are pulling him out of his suit.

I power along the ridge and down into the third little valley to descend on the final site, blasting my warning at them, as they pull children and sleeping old ones into a huddle.

Then I am heading downhill, toward the lake and safety. I know there will be explanations to make, but the code is clear. A team member may be picked up later, if possible, or not at all, if the burn is too close. I will be docked for half the cost of the lost suit, but at least I know how to make obeisance and accept responsibility. You learn these things.

The call comes just as I am leaving the tree line, faint and full of static. I can just make out the words.

"Threefer, I'm sorry. Please explain to them. I couldn't do it."

"Eddo, you still have ten minutes," I transmit back, not caring if anyone is monitoring the channel. "Follow the

stream, it always burns last."

"No. I won't do that. You go. *Northern Wind* ... take care of her."

The chopper is waiting by the lake. The blades turn, scattering sand and leaves as we lift off, and the trees are dark. Over the ridge, dawn's first light is showing, as the burning crews arrive.

DAN RUBIN is 49 years old. He currently lives in Prince Rupert, BC, where he works as a curriculum developer for native language renewal programs. He is also a professional musician who has released five albums of original music over the past 20 years. He has toured and performed on radio and television, and is currently a member of the bilingual duo, One Blue Heron. Dan's first book, *Salt on the Wind*, the biography of shipwrights/sailors Allen and Sharie Farrell, has just been published by Horsdal and Schubart. Three years of research for that book help inspire Dan to write "The Burn," which received an Award of Special Recognition from the BC Writers' Federation at the British Columbia Festival of the Arts in Penticton in May, 1996. Thanks to this encouragement and support from fellow writers, Dan will be expanding the story into a novel, and has already completed a second short story set in IsCity.

ILLUSTRATOR: PETER MacDOUGALL is both an illustrator and an author who has done work for *Horizons SF*, *E-scape*, *ON SPEC* and others. He too stands in awe in the cathedral forests of the west coast. To learn more about him, visit his web page at:

http://mindlink.net/peter_macdougall/wnp.htm



The Obelisk of Cle Elum

Jody Ivanic

illustrated by Murray Lindsay

In a valley with yellow corn, green trees and a blue sky, during the hottest August of the last decade of the century, the obelisk of Sesostris I arrived on the outskirts of Cle Elum.

Twenty-four of Mr. Whar's cows, Holsteins, black and white and shining in the wet morning sun, were the first to see it. They strolled in a single line across the hummock in the east field, seeming to know where they were going even when the obelisk was obscured by the hill, stopping occasionally to press their thick lips into bouquets of sweet grass, then re-forming to walk down the hill towards the stone, fresh as the day it was hewn, at the center of the valley. The lead cow, a large female (she had no name, for Mr. Whar was an unsentimental man and did not name his wards), reached the obelisk first. She looked up, but the sky hurt her eyes so she bent her neck down and nuzzled the grass at the base of the stone.

The obelisk, as if dropped from the sky, had obliterated a section of fence that separated Mr. Whar's field of grass from a field of corn that belonged to Mr. Elkins. The lead cow, the large female, raised her nose to the air and closed her eyes as the smell of young corn washed over her. With her eyes still closed she stepped across the wood that had been the fence and evanesced into the green wall, raising a fine dust and a murmur of leaves that hung in the morning air, turning it golden and crisp. In single file, just as they had arrived, the other twenty-three cows stepped daintily across the splintered railings and disappeared.

On the northeast outskirts of Cairo, a group of boys, as they did every day after school, ran down dirt paths between faded houses to reach a soccer field that had no grass, only pebbles and dust. Even before they reached the field, and as they passed Ziz's Tea House with Ziz sleeping as always with his arms folded and with flies on his face, they knew something was not right. Their round, brown faces rose up and they

saw an empty sky. Living in this forgotten corner of Cairo, they knew about the stone that marked the dusty park that held their field. They knew tourists seldom came here for the pyramids were far to the south; all that remained to mark the ancient city of learning and Gods was the single obelisk. And as they left the shadowed street and ran into the sun that blanketed their field, they saw the great red stone had not fallen to lie in pieces on the ground.

They ran to where mothers, some of them their mothers, stood talking. The women had been on their way to the market on the other side of the park but they did not make it. The boys ran to the base and hoisted one another onto the pedestal that was now empty. The women pressed near and raised their hands upwards. "What is there?" they cried. The boys looked down and between their bare feet could see fresh grooves in the shape of a square. The marks to the east and the west were deeper and wider than those to the north and the south, making it appear to even the dimmest of the boys that the obelisk had been rocked back and forth before being taken. The women heard this and nodded their heads. Certainly the Department of Antiquities had come in the night to remove the relic. Machines can do such things, they concurred. The most optimistic among them voiced the thought that the Department of Antiquities would return the obelisk after they cleaned and studied it, but most knew in their hearts it would be taken to stand near the great pyramids so tourists could have one more memory of a dead country.

The boys kicked their worn ball and the women trudged towards the market. And now, finally, after four thousand years, nothing marks the site of Heliopolis.

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Mr. Elkins and Mr. Whar have a problem. Mr. Elkins now has a section of flattened fence, but this does not bother him much as he gazes up the stone shaft. What does bother him is that Mr. Whar's cows have disappeared and Mr. Whar is blaming him, as if he had requested a sixty-seven foot spire of stone be propelled onto his fence for the express purpose of freeing Mr. Whar's twenty-four cows.

"Number four and number eight are ready to calve and now you've gone and enticed them away with your corn. Did you hear me? You stole my cows."

Mr. Elkins nods and continues to stare upwards.

"Well, I'm going to call the sheriff and see what he says about cow-thieving."

"Do you think that's gold up there?" Elkins asks.

"What?"

"Come, move back."

Elkins takes Mr. Whar by the elbow and leads him back and a short way up the hill so they can look at the top of the obelisk without squinting.

"The top of this here monument is some kind of metal, on that little pyramid part that tops it off, see?"

The sun glints off the burnished metal and Mr. Whar's face tightens then relaxes. He has felt the hope of wealth and lost it in a single breath. "Copper," he says.

"Maybe so, maybe so. I guess you're right. Dammit, looks like gold when you're at the bottom staring straight up."

No shadows fall from the obelisk now, for the sun is directly overhead, washing away the brilliance that was the red granite in the oblique light of early morning. The copper of the pyramidon all but takes on the sheen of silver as it reflects the light of Re as it did so many thousands of years ago.

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The bus recoils out of a pothole and the cigarette is nearly forced from the driver's mouth. He swears and presses with his lips and inhales the black tobacco. Oh Allah, he hates this trip. The people on the bus, what with their expensive perfumes and body talcs and colognes, start to smell so bad that a sickening steam rises within the cramped bus. The short trip to the pyramid fields is much more pleasant, especially in the morning when the streets are still cool from the shade of the almond trees and the Westerners haven't yet had time to mix their foul God-forsaken sweat with their potions so that his bus begins to smell like the very Devil, like Hell itself. This is too far for too little, through such horrible stretches of town. The bus passes Ziz's and lumbers into the grey park and there is nothing to see.

The driver has been a liar his entire life. It comes naturally to him. He turns to the passengers and in the few seconds it takes for their heat-induced murmuring to fade he knows what he will say. "Ladies, gentlemen. The illustrious Department of Antiquities has removed the great obelisk of Sesostris, Son of Ra, to a safe place for restoration and improvement. The next time you visit beautiful Egypt it will stand proud amidst the pyramids from whence it was taken by infidels to this God-forsaken spot. You must return to Egypt to see it!" he concludes with thunder.

There is polite clapping. The tourists wish, to a person, for an iced drink, air-conditioning, and a better driver.

"You might want to take a closer look at this before you go running off to the sheriff or anyone."

"Why?"

"Well, I suppose an argument can be

made about noon from your six o'clock. It seems to me this stone, this monument, is about exactly half on your property and half on mine."

"Knocked the fence down and my cows are gone."

Mr. Elkins listens to the voice of stubbornness and continues as if his neighbor had not spoken. "If an argument can be made that this here thing came so I could steal your cows, my noon says she showed up so that your cows could eat my corn. You see what I'm getting at?"

Mr. Whar is silent for a moment then horks loudly. "Crap," he says.

"Exactly. Crap. I've got no fence, you've got no cows, and sure as hell somebody is going to want to know where we got this thing and I for one don't know. It looks like a monument to me, even valuable, and I don't know what stealing monuments can get you, but I'll bet you it's a hell of a lot more than what you can get for smashing fences and letting a few cows loose."

"Crap," says Mr. Whar.

It is raining, and the obelisk is wet. The red granite that seemed to be a dusty, smooth pink in yesterday's sun is now a deep rust color and the water coursing down its sides has exposed cracks and divots in the stone. The copper atop the pyramidon is dull and green. It is as if the rain has aged the obelisk a thousand years overnight.

If someone had sat on top of the obelisk (or if someone had been tied to the top of it in the manner that Ramses II had tied a son to an obelisk he erected at Thebes to prove the stone would not split apart and fall while being raised) the day before, they would have seen Mr. Whar and Mr. Elkins circle the stone in a vain search for tracks. The person

perched sixty-seven feet in the air would have been able to discern the consternation on their faces when they determined that the only way it could have arrived in their pure valley was if it had flown, by helicopter perhaps, and that same person would have seen each of the men turn a shade paler when each thought to himself that there is no bloody way a helicopter big enough to carry such a weight, if there was such a thing, could have come into this valley with its turbines echoing against the hills, straining with its unnatural load, without waking them. And at precisely the same instant, they knew the obelisk had come on its own.

When one of the mothers who had been on her way to market, a woman who loved to use the phone at Ziz's despite her husband's anger over wasted money that could be used for food, called the Department of Antiquities to find out when and if the obelisk was to be returned, she was told the obelisk of Sesostriis was where it had been for the past 3,938 years, the last standing relic of Heliopolis, city of knowledge and gods; and when she told the man at the Department of Antiquities (who thought he might hang up because he hated the very sound of peasants) that she was at Ziz's Tea House, no more than one hundred paces from the obelisk, and it most definitely was not there, only then did the haughtiness of the voice on the other end of the line depart to be replaced by silence.

If that person who had been sitting on top of the obelisk watching the two farmers circle it and become enlightened as to its method of arrival had stayed, and if that person had superior eyesight, they would have seen the two men get into

Mr. Whar's truck. From the top of the obelisk, the two men could be seen driving around the perimeter of the valley, stopping repeatedly to view their problem. Occasionally the truck would disappear into the forested hills only to reappear on a bluff looking into the valley and, at those heights, the two farmers would frown, for anyone taking the time to travel one of the dirt roads leading into the hills for a picnic would easily spot their problem.

The two men look into the valley and their eyes are drawn to the pink stone outlined against the green as if a marching band had surrounded the obelisk and were playing their hearts out.

"Kind of hard to miss, isn't it, Roger?" says Mr. Elkins.

Mr. Whar spits, just as he has been all afternoon, as he does every day, and does not answer. He prides himself on not speaking unless absolutely necessary.

"No one comes up here to picnic anymore now that they built that waterslide over in Ellensburg," continues Mr. Elkins. "Only the kids come up to drink beer."

Mr. Whar nods. "And to feel each other up."

To have sex, thinks Mr. Elkins.

"They come up here and feel each other up," Mr. Whar continues, "and do that crack you see on TV and every other drug that I've never heard of and drink beer and feel each other up and hell, they're too drugged for us to worry about them seeing or caring about that damned thing."

Mr. Elkins believes that is the longest sentence his neighbor has ever uttered.

First the Cairo papers, in all languages, blamed Iran, then Libya, and finally

moved farther afield to censure Britain, the Soviet Union, Japan (they were accused of buying it, though from whom, no one would say), and finally the United States, before the round of accusations started again with Iran.

And now Ziz was awake all day, and he hired two boys to help him, for more people came now that there was nothing to see than when there had been something to see. Officials, the curious, and even tourist buses filled the park, to such an extent the boys could no longer play soccer and had to spend their time asking for money and cigarettes. And even if he had had time, Ziz would not have wondered what the three men sitting in a kitchen in a valley in the Cascades in the Northwest corner of America with a Seattle newspaper spread in front of them were thinking about doing with the obelisk that had brought Ziz so much unexpected profit.

"The problem is not one of how or why it is here, but one of what shall be done with it," says a man in a white T-shirt. "Thus far we have been fortunate weather-wise." Mr. Whar and Mr. Elkins nod without looking at the man. The weather certainly had been odd of late. The valley their farms lay in had filled with clouds that first night and they had stayed there, tamping themselves down between the hills and providing a blockade of mist and rain. And though the valleys on either side were dry and filled with sunshine, theirs was wet and fermenting.

The man in the white T-shirt is the lawyer for both Mr. Elkins and Mr. Whar. This is not strange because there are three lawyers in Cle Elum and each handles the affairs of a third of the farmers around the town. And it is not strange that Mr. Elkins has chosen this man (his

name is Robert Gant, a graduate of Brown and Columbia, who has found peace in a rural town across the country from where he grew up), for Mr. Elkins prides himself on the use of the latest techniques in farming. He uses a computer to track weather patterns and to plot the growth of his crops; to determine fertilizer levels and feed times he sends soil samples to the University to be analyzed; he uses the latest in growth hormones for his animals. He has never read an almanac and luck has nothing to do with his farming. He is the type of farmer who would use an Eastern-educated lawyer.

What is strange is that Roger Whar uses Robert Gant. A charter member of Baudillard's primitive society, one would have expected Roger to retain the services of one of the other lawyers in town, both of whom grew up in Cle Elum and who traveled only as far as Seattle to get their law degrees before returning. But when Mr. Elkins bought a computer, Roger followed, and though he only uses it for the two games the salesman talked him into buying, it sits on a desk near a window so as to be easily visible from the road. And when Mr. Elkins told Roger he was sending soil samples to the University, Roger did so also, even though he placed the unread reports in a drawer of the desk that holds the computer (on which he has become quite proficient at landing a 747) along with the unused farming programs. Roger *does* read the Almanac, though he doesn't necessarily believe everything that's in there, and farms mainly with the senses, with his nose lifted to scent the winds and his eyes on the clouds and the moon.

Robert looks at the paper. On the last page of the first section is a two-inch article on the disappearance of a 121-ton

obelisk from northeastern Cairo. It is not deemed, in North America at least, a story worthy of much space or prominence.

The men have three ideas and know they must leave the room agreed on one, though after a bottle and a half of gin, that does not seem likely to any of them.

When the phone rings, Mr. Whar says, "About time." Robert leans back and cocks his head in a practiced lawyerly listening pose.

Mr. Elkins picks up the phone and holds a pen over a blank sheet of paper. "Yes, I'll accept the charges," he says. "Hi, son."

Mr. Elkins had asked his son to do a little research for him, had told him a show on PBS had piqued his interest about something, and of course the library in Ellensburg isn't going to be of much use. Mr. Elkins writes for a while, then says goodbye.

"Well?" Robert asks.

"Just the important stuff," Roger says.

"Well. Sesostri took the throne after his father, Amenemhat, was assassinated. No one knows by whom, though some figure it may have been Sesostri himself. He ruled forty-five years and built many monuments, of which our obelisk was one that marked the 30th year of his reign."

"There's no doubt?"

"The drawing of the inscription we faxed Mick matches exactly the picture he found of the obelisk. No doubt. Anyway, let's see here. He built the temple of Re'Atum at Heliopolis and as was the custom flanked the entrance with a pair of obelisks. The rock was quarried from an island near Aswan and barged down the Nile. It's made of red granite."

"We know that just by looking at it," says Mr. Whar.

"Sometimes they were capped with

gold though ours was topped with white copper."

"That figures. We get a cheap one," says Mr. Whar, who is talking a lot for him.

"How did he find all of this out?" Robert asks, appreciating the research Mr. Elkins' son has conducted.

"Not so difficult. There aren't many obelisks left and the ones that are have been studied fairly rigorously. There's one in New York, one in London, one in Paris, three or four in Istanbul and thirteen in Rome. All removed from Egypt through the centuries. There's only four left standing in Egypt, three now. Get this. The obelisk of Sesostri is the oldest surviving obelisk and the only monument left at Heliopolis, which was the major religious center of Egypt for thousands of years. Jesus."

"What does it say?"

"Not much:

*Horus Living in Births,
King of Upper and Lower Egypt
— Kheperkare
Son of Re, Sesostri,
beloved of the souls of
Heliopolis,
living forever,
Horus of Gold Living in Births,
the Good God Kheperkare.
The first occasion of the Jubilee,
he made it to be given life forever.*

And that's it."

"Sounds like he's just blowing his own horn," says Roger. "Just like the bloody politicians nowadays."

Mr. Elkins walks to the window and looks into the dark valley. Rain splatters the window. He pours himself a glass of water and sits back down at the table.

"Let's sleep on what to do," says Robert. Neither he nor Mr. Elkins can drink

as much as Mr. Whar, and he does not think it a good idea they stay with him, for they may agree to do what he wants.

Robert lies next to his sleeping wife and listens to the occasional car that has left the Eagles club and now proceeds slowly, cautiously, down the road home. His son sleeps, the dog sleeps, and Robert imagines even the fish in their tank sleep.

A stone keeps him awake. Nothing, absolutely *nothing* can help him decide what to do. Law school does not prepare one for such occurrences. He thinks of the damned card games he keeps losing money at, fifty one week, two hundred the next, and of the money he owes his parents, and he comes again to his idea. Nobody asked for the obelisk, and certainly once word gets out it will be only a matter of time until an arrangement is made to remove it. Thankfully, given its age, the obelisk certainly cannot be rushed away too quickly. There will be time to earn money. Tickets can be sold to view it, and those greedy bastards from TV and the papers will pay obscenely for exclusives. His thoughts turn to bleeding them much as the copper bleeds green onto the granite.

Roger Whar sits at his computer, not bothering to try to sleep. His 747 has crashed four times in a row. Hundreds are dead but that does not bother him. He takes off again but his mind is in the field. He wonders about his cows, whether they'll come back or not, but quickly forgets about them. They are not important at the moment. His lawyer can determine the best way to go about suing Elkins.

Roger does not like having the obelisk of Sesostri in his field. He knows Robert wants to make money from this,

after all he is a lawyer, but Roger is a shy man. He enjoys his watching TV, landing his jet, walking on his land. None of this he wishes to share. He's not sure how, but he knows his life will be disrupted, perhaps permanently, if the monument stays. This time he cannot follow Elkins, this time he must act on his own. He increases power and avoids having his jet slammed to the ground by wind-shear. He's not yet sure how he will get a chain around the top of the obelisk, but he believes his tractor is strong enough to pull the intruder down.

Mr. Elkins sleeps soundly. His mind is made up. He would have liked to have left it, for a new fence could have been built around it. But it is not theirs, and could he ever rest not knowing how, or why? Experts must be brought in, science must determine the facts surrounding this occurrence.

He knows something must be done soon, tomorrow even, before that misanthropic fool Roger does something crazy like blow it up with dynamite. That thought had made him laugh, but not for very long. What a shame that would be. We are always destroying, he thought, when it is always so much more interesting to study, to see why.

He pictured the obelisk rising beside the Smithsonian. He is the guest of honor, and there is a plaque with his name above Roger's. When he thought about all of this, the idea of returning the piece to Heliopolis did not even enter his mind.

And he, like Roger and Robert, will soon see a field notable only for a broken fence, and he, like Roger and Robert, will continue to live out a life that, for a short time, was enchanted.

The rain and fog have fled. The valley is quiet this early in the morning, silent except for birdsong. In the unsure light the obelisk is almost invisible. The copper is gone, having hemorrhaged into the stone, coating it until it is a murky green that fades in with the fields and hills. The sun rises and a ray touches the tip of the stone as golden light floods to the four cardinal points. The stone ages centuries in moments and again it is pink. Cracks grow, holes deepen. Mighty American clouds cross the horizon and block the sun that illumines the rose-colored spire, then disappear as if smoke.

The sun gives Mr. Whar no pleasure. He had taken it for granted there would be clouds. He closes the curtain and continues to dress. Weather was weather. He would do what he set out to do. The picker had been rented in Ellensburg so as not to arouse any suspicion. Everyone in Cle Elum knew he had no use for one. He brought it home in the dark, after having a restaurant-meal in Ellensburg—a frightful waste of time and money, that.

He drives slowly so as not to wake Mr. Elkins. Once he is clear of the farmhouses and over the crest of the hill, he puts the truck into neutral and lets it roll through the dawn. He parks at the base of the obelisk and enters the picker basket with his thickest rope. The throw is still difficult, perhaps twenty feet—but he manages to lasso the stone on his fourth try. Mr. Whar yawns as he lowers the picker and drives home.

Despite not sleeping well, Mr. Elkins is awake. He feels uneasy, and decides it is the lack of clouds that bothers him. Naked, he enters his attic with a pair of binoculars. He has discovered if he looks out the attic vent on the south side

of his house he can see the tip of the obelisk. Often it is invisible if the fog is too thick but this morning he knows the spire will be visible. He hears the baritone rumble of Mr. Whar's tractor. He knows his neighbor's fields almost as thoroughly as his own. He runs through his mind the chores Mr. Whar needs to do at this time of the season and realizes, just as he lifts the binoculars to his eyes, there is absolutely nothing the tractor can do today. He focuses and understands when he sees the gold necklace about the obelisk.

He pulls on a pair of sweat pants and a pair of runners but does not stop to tie the shoelaces. His first few strides are fast but, just as Mr. Whar did earlier, he stops and looks at the sky and around the valley; he sniffs the air and swells with delight at the amber light that fills the valley like water. He smiles and looks at the tractor. Mr. Whar sees him and strikes the steering wheel with his fist. Mr. Elkins starts to run and as soon as he does the tractor dies.

Mr. Elkins steps on one of his shoelaces and slides headfirst on his bare chest through the wet grass. It's chilly in the damp grass but he thinks he could sleep there. He struggles to his feet and jogs forward. The tractor won't start, won't even turn over. He's in no hurry now so as he trots forward he looks at the trees on either side of him and tracks the path of the birds in the sky.

As he nears Mr. Whar, he feels possessive of the obelisk, protective of his imagined place on the ceremonial podium and he becomes, just slightly, angry.

"Don't do this, you ignorant old man," he says.

Mr. Whar stops his attempts at reviving the tractor. His face plainly shows he is stunned and hurt.

"I mean, why do this, Roger?" Mr. Elkins says in a gentle voice. He damns himself for his words.

Mr. Whar says nothing and tries the tractor again. Mr. Elkins reaches for the key and Mr. Whar slaps his hand away. "Now, Roger." He tries again and Mr. Whar steps from the tractor and they begin to waltz. A yellow bubble, the sun rises and they slow their halfhearted wrestle. The valley is sodden and silent. It is as if they are struggling in a glass of weak scotch. They fall in line: the sun, the obelisk, and them. The valley brightens and the two men darken within the elongated shadow of the stone. They slow and rest, their chins on each other's right shoulder. Mr. Whar yawns into Mr. Elkins' ear, and he responds in kind. It is sleep and it is not sleep. The shadow that blackens them wavers like rings upon a pond, and slowly wisps away into nothingness. Mr. Whar shudders and Mr. Elkins jerks as if woken from a sleepwalk. They step back from each other and say nothing. Mr. Whar looks about to see, unlikely as it is, whether anybody saw them. Both men look to the sky, they are farmers, but neither needs to mention the sun is not where it should be.

The valley is filled with a desert heat, an oppression really, and the men look down the hill not to see whether the obelisk remains but to confirm that the stone has abandoned them. Mr. Elkins walks down the hill towards the depression amidst the fence splinters. Mr. Whar stays on the hill and watches his neighbor begin his investigation. He snorts when he sees Mr. Elkins drop to his hands and knees to inspect the ground.

At the exact moment that Mr. Whar snorts, Mr. Elkins looks up the hill. He watches Mr. Whar turn and walk to-

wards home. He returns to the autopsy. There is not much to see but he is thorough.

He is still there, on his hands and knees, when Mr. Whar comes over the hill pushing his wheelbarrow in front of him. Mr. Elkins stands and waits patiently.

When Mr. Whar reaches the depression he kicks a few pieces of wood out of the way. A blanket covers the contents of the wheelbarrow. A shovel lies on top.

"I'm sorry, Roger," Mr. Elkins says.

Mr. Whar spits. He steps to the center of the depression that indicated where the obelisk once stood and begins to dig.

Mr. Elkins steps back and with his hands clasped behind his back says, "I'll order up some wood to fix the fence today."

Mr. Whar silently digs.

Mr. Elkins concedes and takes another step back. He is reminded of the time he moved here and of the months it took him to get Mr. Whar to nod hello. The thought of going through that again depresses him.

There is a rustling amidst the corn and Mr. Whar's cows, moving drowsily, gather about the depression that held Sesostri's monument to the sun. The farmers do not move, and they are not particularly surprised. Mr. Whar nods to his cows and gives them a tranquil visual inspection. He continues to dig.

Soon his hole is finished. He pulls the blanket from the wheelbarrow and lifts out the monitor of his computer. Gently Mr. Whar places it in the hole. Mr. Elkins does not try to stop him. The rest of the computer follows, and finally, the notebooks filled with soil sample results. The black dirt makes scratching noises when it hits the computer. The grave is

soon complete, and as graves do, it rises slightly above the surrounding ground.

Mr. Elkins watches until the job is complete. He turns, and now it is his turn to walk up the hill alone. Mr. Whar

watches him for a while and then walks to the nearest cow to begin a closer inspection. The cows are all lying down now, and like children, they are oblivious to what goes on about them. •

JODY IVANIC lives in Vancouver. His short fiction has recently appeared in *Grain*, *Prairie Fire*, *The Post*, *NeWest Review*, *The Fiddlehead*, and *Hawaii Review*.

ILLUSTRATOR: MURRAY LINDSAY says, "Here I am back in Edmonton as a graphic artist for the second season of *Jake and the Kid* while getting back into the button biz again (two years since my last con). The big question: How to make the internet thing make a buck?"

ASK MR. SCIENCE

Do you have a question concerning life or the true nature of the universe? Mr. Science can answer it! Send your questions to Ask Mr. Science, c/o ON SPEC Magazine, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6.

Mr. D.M., of Vancouver, BC, asks:

[Q] : How many mad scientists does it take to screw in a light bulb?

[A] : If we restrict our consideration to professional mad scientists only, that is, to those who hold valid membership in the GPMSBD—the Guild of Professional Mad Scientists and their Beautiful Daughters—then the answer is: "None." The membership agreement specifically prohibits the use of electric lighting of any type for purposes of general illumination. Instead, members may employ only lamps or torches which make use of flickering gas, kerosene or other fossil fuels. Light emitted by Hertz Ladders is permissible, but only if it accounts for no more than 15% of total available artificial light. The inventions of registered mad scientists may, if genuinely required, use incandescent lamps of a rating not to exceed 7 watts each. Sources of light emitted in the form of narrow spectral lines, such as that from lasers and glowing ionized rare gasses, are not regulated. •

Green Children

Ian V. Worling

illustrated by Nancy Niles

This morning I saw a green child. Potato miso soup for breakfast. I hate rice. English Day Breakfast Coffee with Minna no Tomodatchi low fat sweetener. Down to the station on my One Stop WAO Bicycle. Past the Oakwood Hills Mansion apartment, the Lets English Club, Sony, and a school. I buy an Energize bar, a bottle of Regain Health and twenty Hope cigarettes at the platform Kiosk. An otherwise perfectly normal morning. I saw a green child.

Six days a week I train it into the company. On the way to the station I pass an innumerable mass of blue-uniformed children dragging their little booted feet to this huge concrete box school. Preschoolers scuff in one door to emerge, from a different door, thirteen years later as pre-college kids. The smallest have pigtails with blue bows and hats if girls, or blue hats, shorts and skinned knees if boys. The girls are gregarious and clump together laughing and giggling, perhaps with some innate knowledge of a fate different from that of the boys. Even when briefcases replace those enormous cardboard knapsacks, the boys still frown and plod.

Not all of the children are green, only a few. They are not Kermit the Frog green. They are not *Star Trek* alien green. They are green in a refracted light sort of way. It's not even a color but a slight luminescence, as if they had been dipped in some translucent gel and not quite wiped off. Green tinged from a distance, green closer up, with just a hint of iridescent limey yellow green as I slow my bike to a crawl and pass a small boy. He glows green. Normal in every other way. Straight hair, little blue hat cocked to one side, as if in disrespect of all school rules concerning the placement of school hats. There is green around his eyes and a light yellow coming down from his nose and around the corners of his mouth, like snot. For some reason



this one boy stands out. He is the greenest of the children and seemingly the most miserable, as if complexion and constitution were related.

The company is not the best place to lose one's mind. We work nine to five Monday to Friday and there is one Saturday morning option meeting to which everybody has to go. It is called Option Meeting. I don't know why. The company's hours of operation are stated at each new introduction right after handing over the obligatory white name card. People sometimes take a step back, bob their heads and say, "ahhh—nine to five *des ney*" which translates roughly as, "boy, aren't you lucky."

Saying ahhh a lot and nodding are good for communication and general etiquette. This is just habit now. My other company habit is drinking. Tuesday and Thursday are my section's drinking nights. It is a good thing we all finish so early as I can be delirious and on the train by eight as opposed to twelve like the other suits. My first four weeknights here, as not only the new employee, but the new foreign employee, are spent drinking with the other sections. By my first Friday, with flu symptoms, I decide to take the option meeting as optional and stay in bed until I'm well. The section manager, Hayato, awakens me frantic on Monday on the phone.

"You must come in to work."

"I'm sick."

"Yes, it's okay."

"It's okay I'm sick?"

"No, no, it's okay you come in."

Hayato, ex-European tour guide that he is, knows better than to try and explain the idiosyncrasies of company life to me. He has to abide by the same rules.

On my second working Monday I'm

in the sick room with Masao, the number one person in my section of four. Masao is older and doesn't drink with us. He drinks most nights with the senior people of the other sections. He is teaching me how to make deep sea fishing lures and enjoys looking at pictures of boats. Kyu enters with Hayato. Kyu is the owner of the company. He appears when something is about to go wrong or when I'm in trouble. He is quiet and pensive, and assumes a sense of presence which is near Godlike. As God of the company's collective soul, Kyu should really speak English and occasionally he does, short sentences, very slow and full of meaning, fragments which command reverence and bear Hayato's idiomatic stamp. He will not speak to me in Japanese. Hayato explains in English, in his non-serious, non-Japanese way that the company has never lost time to sickness. Kyu repeats this, "Has ... never ... lost ... sicktime."

Head swimming and holding a large ball of pink nylon cord, I nod and say, "Ahhh." Hayato is looking at the ceiling. He is allowed to be silly when speaking English but I do not ask if we have ever lost time to hangovers. As Kyu is leaving I remember to apologize for missing the Saturday meeting.

Kyu turns and smiles, "It is Okay," he says. "It is option meeting." Hayato rolls his eyes fearing another explanation of the word option.

This week's conversation with Hayato was about being wrong. The word used for "wrong" in his language is *chigau*, which can be interpreted either as "it's different" or "it's wrong." On some days it seems especially important to me that Hayato know his opinion is not just different, that he know he is, in fact, wrong. I usually have to repeat "You are wrong" in English after the Japanese

sentence to get my point across.

"Hayato, how do I say: *You are wrong*, not *Your opinion is different from mine*, but that *You are unequivocally, and without doubt, incorrect? Wrong*, so to speak?"

"Well," Hayato replies, "in extreme circumstances—when someone is, has, a very different idea, you can say *chigau shte imas*, which means what you have said is different from what I have said and there is implied non-agreement. We basically disagree and what *You* have said is taken to be 'wrong,' but in some cases, it can also mean..." My section manager has very quietly made his way over to the door "...that what you have said is..." Smiling. "...just a little bit..." Only his head remains. "...different."

Over the months, Hayato has continually resisted my attempts to single him out for blame for anything which I find to be *different*. I could say to him, "Excuse me, but I think there is something in the water which is causing the local children to exhibit a rather greenish hue about their faces." This is not a good idea. I present him with enough absurdities already and he counters by quizzing me on what he reads in the *Weekly World News*, the only paper to which he subscribes.

Kyu would lean back and hold his chin. "Ah yes, green children, is this the case?" Which is what he says when he is thinking something you don't want him to be thinking.

I will talk to Seichi, the first person I ever met in the company. When I first met him in the office foyer he was wearing a white cotton germ mask because he had a cold. As etiquette requires he will not take the mask off, even when speaking. This makes his mix of Japanese and broken English incomprehensible. He doesn't distinguish between

communication with me, and the tea lady who speaks only Chinese. He writes down words I don't know in hieroglyphs which he then has to look up.

"I am playboy," he says in English. The sides of his head wrinkle with his insane, unseen, grin. His hair always wants to be taller than me, "And you?" he adds.

I say I haven't given it much thought.

He writes down two characters in the Chinese/Japanese script and then searches for an English-Japanese dictionary. They are *false modesty*.

"Well, yes," I reply.

Seichi laughs. He has a pure sense of insight found only in the insane and the mentally deficient. Nobody else notices this. He fills out receipts starting from the back of the book. He is always smiling. Everyone else just nods and offers the explanation, "Ah, well. He's from Kumamoto." As if this explains everything. Seichi is section person number three.

I go through the basic precepts of my problem with him. He listens intently and says on cue, "Green children. Everyday. It's a problem."

"What should I do, Seichi?"

"Don't know."

"Should I tell Kyu?"

"Maybe No."

"Have you ever seen a green child?"

Seichi stops and thinks. Enough of the process occurs outside his body that I know he is giving the problem his full consideration. This will not be dismissed. He has the advantage of not being able to think in English so there won't be any of Hayato's polemics.

"No. Don't see."

"Do you think there is something in the water, a reason, maybe the government?"

He considers this for an equal length of time and tells me he will check. I cannot ask for more.

Inoe is section person number two. He sits across from me. He speaks very quickly, uses eyedrops for "relax" or "refresh" depending on the time of day, and gesticulates wildly most of the time. Waves and sweeps are punctuated with English words: "Very Bad. It's Big. Banana." None of these are used for communication, only emphasis. The words "very big" are used over the phone to describe his mood, the weather and myself.

Inoe has been pointing at me and saying "club" for almost a month. I have always figured he meant Jazz club or Dance club. No. The "club" in question turns out to be the ubiquitous Japanese hostess club.

Inoe, Hayato and myself enter a basement cavern. My host strides to the center of the room. "Beautiful Girls," he sweeps his arm towards the hostesses clustered in the corner. We order five girls and a bottle of whisky. The girls take turns lighting our cigarettes and mixing the whisky with water and ice. Maybe, I think, Japanese Hostess clubs are good.

One of my girls squeals and bounces up and down whenever I break into Japanese. "Very good," she says. This is bad. Whenever the Japanese compliment you on something, they do so because they want you to feel good about your ability. It may also mean, they think you feel embarrassed or inferior about your ability, and therefore need to be complimented. In this case it refers to the two bars we hit before coming here. That, and the fact that I am too drunk to make coherent sentences. I start talking about the children, the government plot, Elvis and God, how horribly unfair life is. Really good stuff. Three of the five

girls have seen green children. Can they be trusted? They are paid to agree with us.

Inoe gets up and starts yelling; "Yes. Yes. Green children."

I make the mistake of translating *sugoi nagi ashi* as "fucking great legs" for Hayato, and he is hysterical until we get thrown out.

At the next bar, and things are starting to swim a bit here, I meet Miyuki. This modern Geisha is more refined, taller, and more scantily clad than the girls at the previous club. She is also more expensive. She points to her nose and says, "Me too," in English. Why do Japanese hostesses speak English so much better than Japanese salarymen? She shows me yellow and green streaks running up the insides of her arms. Part of her neck and collarbone have a really sexy green blue tinge. I can almost see the lines around her eyes which are covered by makeup. Inoe is still trying to get Hayato to tell him the new word. It would be really bad if Kyu were to hear Inoe yell "fucking great legs" at the coffee machine.

After the bar I remember waking up on a bench near my house in the morning rain. I go home, change, and catch an early train back into the company. I stand next to a green salaryman in the train.

In the sick room I meet Kyu. Masao, who spends most mornings in the sick room, has the choice of boats the company will buy down to three, and enough lures for the next two years. I make the mistake of mentioning the children to Kyu.

"Ah yes, and Mr. Inoe too," he says. "But..." He pauses. "I think they were hostesses. Yes?" Kyu is half smiling to himself. "Yes, green hostess too." I pause in order to give the impression of

deep thought. Kyu is looking pretty green around the gills himself these days. Green hostesses.

Masao is typically supportive, "Mr. Inoe, he crazy."

At lunch I see a green salaryman and three greenish-blue office ladies lunching together at Love Burger.

Today Seichi comes to my desk. He is extremely happy. Under his arm are several volumes of computer paper. He can not stop smiling or running his hand through his hair: I have never seen anyone so happy. "It is government's report," he says.

I skim it. It is written in very difficult Japanese, most of which I am less than familiar with. Seichi points out a few key kanji in the first pages. Flips. A few more I know, "Such and such report, recommendation. Such and such, place, economy—the danger of earthquakes, in consideration of world opinion, aforementioned reasons, appendix j, selective genius." This is a massive amount of legislation and it is slow going.

Halfway through the third stack of paper my friend says, "Keizai wa change."

"Economy, Seichi."

"Yes, *ekonomi* wa change.. World *mo* change."

I mutter through the translation out of habit, "Because of a change in the world economy and other, aforementioned reasons, the Japanese people as a whole are being called upon to work together in order to bring about certain {previously mentioned} ends which require a special (specific?) effort to meet the demands of a changing global etc., etc., etc."

"What ends, Seichi?"

He points to a Kanji on the front cover of the report. "Fish."

"Fish?"

"Fish."

"No, not fish."

"Yes, fish fish." He makes the hand motion for fish which I imitate without thinking. He is looking at me with great seriousness now, afraid that I won't believe him. Afraid perhaps that he will have to spend hours convincing me that he has not made this up.

"The Japanese people are turning into fish. Are you going to turn into a fish, Seichi?" I ask.

"Me? No, I maybe goback Kumamoto."

I must teach him the word *return*. Seichi is smiling again. This report must have taken months to get hold of. He has read the entire thing, memorized parts of it. He can flip back and forth in it. He has been dying to see this look of dumb amazement on my face and is now basking in its light. "In the summer humidity—water particles—gradual transition of density for the following months—7th and 8th. In the event the earthquake occurs before this time, a certain segment of the population..."

I know Kyu will only say, "They are not green hostesses, they are green fish," and that would be the end of that discussion. Hayato would shrug and look pensive and then forget all about it. It is hard to explain. Things repeat here. Patterns are followed. Everything which comes in is appropriated and changed. No where else in the world are the ways of adaptation so complete. Arguments become cyclical, and therefore pointless, just by getting lost in the language. Colleagues who can communicate with one another without speaking are said to have a *great understanding*. I usually notice this in bars between senior salarymen. They sit and drink and occasionally look into each other's eyes, or whisky glasses, or just at the table. This

I have come to accept.

At the public bath in my neighborhood, the children, and a few adults, are sprouting scales around their shoulders. One very small boy had the beginnings of a small silver tail. It hadn't occurred to me that the effects changed with water, sweat or humidity. In the shower I have streaks of yellow and green down my own back, paler than the ones I see

at the baths. Bluish fluorescent streaks appear on the insides of my arms but only when it is hot out. I am going to be a very strange looking fish indeed. Thinking about it, it doesn't seem to be a bad idea. I won't have to ride the train or wear a jacket in the 110 degree humidity. There will be a whole new market for what we do.

I must remember to call Miyuki. •

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ILLUSTRATOR: NANCY NILES lives a quiet life in Calgary, Alberta, practicing art, heraldry, and anarchic environmental design. She's aided in this by three cats and an understanding Significant Other of long tenure.



Leaving Paris

Andrew Gray

illustrated by Peter Francis

I'm Paul Gaugin when I leave, stepping out onto her fire escape, marveling at the quality of the light, the brilliance of the sky, the glittering towers at the centre of the city. I see palm trees and dusky, pliant women for a moment. The noise of traffic blurs and shifts, becomes the rhythmic roar of surf on coral beaches. I settle into character and the visions fade. I'm leaving Paris, my wife and children, driven by a knowledge of destiny they can't hope to understand.

I climb down to the street and start walking uptown. I am whistling, intoxicated with freedom, the centre of an expanding sphere of possibility. I have to fight an impulse to take the subway to the airport and fly to Tahiti.

Gaugin lasts four days.

Coming down is hard, much harder than I have ever felt it before. Whoever made the Gaugin must have had a puritan streak, or maybe I'm bleeding into the character on a subconscious level, for there is a dark pool of guilt under the surface of the personality. Normally I'd do a transition character, someone calming and bland but radically different—Buddha or a sports hero, a gender bender even. Blast the old character into fragments. But day three I was raving and I kicked my player against the wall of the apartment, cracking the case and a couple of toes in the process. Now the little machine is dead, and I'm stuck with myself until I manage to go outside and get it repaired.

Day four I stagger around in a daze, spending most of the morning vomiting in the toilet. I drink unfiltered water and lie on my back on the floor, the TV turned to the meditation channel. I try not to kick a hole in the screen. That day I find an unfinished painting in my studio—a woman on a tropical beach, her breasts bared. Her face is Alison's and she looks terrified. But what can I do with flat art? I burn it in the fireplace.

My head is still a mess: we have been doing artists for almost two months now, getting deeper and deeper, and disconnected images flash through my mind. I close my eyes and see bodies piled like cordwood, smears of colour, fields of flowers and light. A man on a chair, his head a blurred scream of pigment. A night sky, alive with whirling stars. I open my eyes and the walls press in on me and I remember Hemingway, the feel of the shotgun in his mouth, the taste of gun oil—Sylvia Plath and the smell of gas, strong in her nostrils.

My head is swollen with memory. I am feverish with the infection of other lives.

Alison in her loft two months ago, excited, tearing apart her old installations, putting up the frame for this new project. She talks as she works. "You've tried it, haven't you?" she says, unplugging a small computer.

"A little," I say. "It's fun."

"Sure, but there's no structure to it, is there? People do fragments to put them in the right moods, or they try on people they admire, people they want to be."

"Except for the junkies, don't forget them."

"Yeah," she says. "Here, give me a hand with the wiring." I start coiling loops of extension cord over my shoulder as she pulls long filaments of optical cable from the skeletal structure of her previous work. "But junkies," she continues. "They're taking on characters because they've lost their own. They hunt for personalities, hoping to find what they're missing. What I want to do is a quantum leap ahead of all that."

"It's intriguing," I reply.

She smiles. "Come on, Peter, you know it's brilliant."

She was right, and I knew I had to be

involved. Art had changed fundamentally in the last ten or fifteen years. The old forms—painting, sculpture, video—had stagnated while character forming had exploded. To creatively record fragments of yourself, or even more challenging, to recreate the personality of someone long dead, had become the cutting edge. What Alison wanted to do was link the old and the new, taking advantage of the most powerful elements of both. We'd give the viewers a short-term memory implant and present them with an installation designed to trigger sensations and associations based on the new memories they had received. The implant would be us, distilled from the two hundred years of art and the lives of artists that we were going to download into ourselves.

My own career is going nowhere. The success of this might make my name in a field where reputation is everything. I'm practically salivating at the chance to hitch myself to her rising star.

The early years are wonderful. We go walking as Monet and Manet, Renoir, Lautrec, Degas. She wears a headset for the video, constantly recording our responses, and at night we feed our memories into her computer. As Seurat and Magritte one afternoon we make love in a quiet spot in High park. It's quite a gender twist, and she has a deliciously shocked look as I unbutton her blouse and stroke her breast. The sunlight flickers down around us and I see everything break apart into fragments of colour and light. "Magnifique," I whisper as I kiss her nipple, feeling the warmth of her breath on the back of my neck. She giggles and reaches for the button of my pants.

We are still only scratching the surface, casting off these other lives as

snakes shed their skins.

The twentieth century is more difficult. We knew it would be, but we had no idea just how difficult. We start to go in different directions; I am the first to sense this when she delves into the bright, sensual images of Klimt while I lose myself, "wallow" as she puts it, in Schiele and Munch. I am drawn to their starkness, their morbidity. I dally with the absurdities of Dada, the dissonance of Diaghilev and Stravinsky in a break from painters. I'm changing people two or three times faster than Alison is. I can't help myself, though I know she's becoming concerned at the speed I move through these characters. But there is so much out there, so many lives. How can we afford to miss any of them, especially the dark, disturbing ones? They, perhaps more than anything, help to define what the twentieth century was.

"They aren't actual people, you know." Alison is lying on her bed, sketching me with a dataglove as I sit in front of her. On her wallscreen I am an enormous, flickering creature. She moves a light source around and the shadows shift across my face until she is satisfied. I stick out my tongue and she laughs, quickly taking the image and stretching it out until I am licking the floor like a panting dog in the heat.

"Cute," I say. "And yes, I know they aren't real."

"I just think it's easy to forget sometimes that characters are interpretations—they were made by people. We've got some of the best, but in the end they're just characters. You should see the crap that's out there—sloppy editing, poor research, anachronisms, creator bleed."

"Isn't that the point?" I ask. "It makes

this a perfect Neopostmodernist experiment. Everything's suspect and self-referential, especially the tools of our art. We're trying to interpret interpretation."

"I know," she says. She touches the back of her glove and wipes the picture, looking up at me. "I guess I'm just afraid we're getting in too deep. It's making me feel strange, like I'm not myself sometimes. Maybe we should slow down."

I try to cut back, but something in me craves this, the shock and thrill of the character settling over mine, the subtle invasion of other memories and emotions. I go behind Alison's back, sneaking into her database and copying her files. I don't know where she gets them—well-connected friends, I imagine—but she has a huge selection of stunning, powerful characters.

I start branching out, going beyond artists. I tell myself I am trying to understand the times they lived in and the events that influenced them. But I know it is something more than this. I am lost in it all, in the century of war and genocide and ideology. The artists I become take journeys inside themselves, digging up disturbing things. And the other characters—they are something entirely different. To understand Picasso I am Mussolini and Franco, Hitler and Stalin. And following their warped visions I become Amin and Pol Pot and Guzman. They begin to blur, a jumble of voices and memories tugging at me. I am Conrad, Sartre and Camus, Hemingway, Plath, Larkin, Mishima plunging the dagger into his belly. I flail back into artists: Rothko, Warhol, Mapplethorpe, Van Gogh for the second or third time, Francis Bacon for what seems like an eternity. At times I feel as if I am drowning, casting my arms about for a life preserver. And sometimes it feels like I am

so close to an understanding that I can almost see it.

Alison is managing to cope with it all somehow. She becomes Georgia O'Keefe for a long time, and Jasper Johns. She takes the Dali Lama, Einstein, Marie Curie when I persuade her to try historical figures. I know she's trying to show me that I am only seeing one side of things, but her personalities seem so diminished, so shallow compared to mine. It is as if the characters I have been still exist within me. They are beginning to seem more real than living people.

The fifth day after Gaugin I wake up ravenous. I open my fridge to find mangoes and coconut milk and papayas. The rich tropical smell is overwhelming and I am almost Gaugin again. I stagger back to bed. It is early evening when I have enough control to go out for groceries. On the way back to the apartment I pass an electronics store and give into a sudden impulse, going in and putting a new player on my overloaded credit card.

Later that night I take the memory chip from the broken player and slot it into my new machine. The small screen lights up, showing Gaugin as the last program accessed. No surprise. The item before this on the program list startles me, though. I read the name Abel Moroz, and memories bubble to the surface.

We argue when she finds I plan on becoming Moroz. "It's too much," she says. "I can't let you, not now, not after everyone else you've been. It's changing you, and it's scaring me."

"How can we just ignore the most influential artist of the last twenty years?"

"Easily." She runs her hands through her hair. She looks tired, and I imagine I look worse. "This isn't an interpreta-

tion, you know. He had a personality dump before he killed himself. This is a raw program, from someone who was probably insane."

"I've been *Hitler*, for Christ's sake. You think I can't take Moroz after that?"

"No," she says. "No, I don't. I'm sorry."

I lose my temper, somebody's anger spewing out of me. It might even be mine. I say terrible things and she tells me to leave. The last I remember I am in a park three or four blocks from her loft, trying to pull apart a bench.

When I remember the argument I call her, but there's no answer. The next day, day six after Gaugin, I take the subway down to her place. There's still no answer when I buzz at the door, so I go up the fire escape and use my key to get in. The blinds are down and the room is dark when I enter. As I carefully move forward, trying to see in the dimness, screens flicker to life around me. I jump, startled, then realize I have triggered the installation—she must have completed it. In the bluish glare of the flatscreens I can see cables, cloth and sheets of plastic, and something shining further in.

I start walking through the piece. Every footstep triggers a screen; pictures start flashing across them. I see myself and Alison—in her loft, in the park, speaking with the voices of dead artists. There are paintings appearing as well, changing with our voices. "*Guernica*," I hear myself say, "speaks for itself. It is the face of our century." Alison talks of bones and flowers. I hear myself say "*Magnifique*," then a giggle—on the screen there is a quick flash of a nipple, then a Schiele painting, two lovers intertwined. As they continue, the pictures become darker, more tortured, and my face appears more and more frequently.

My voice drowns Alison out. I see myself as Rothko, as Bacon, as Hitler. With each person, my face looks increasingly unfamiliar, as if the characters have started to express themselves through my skin.

Moving through the work, battered by images and sounds, I feel something slowly dawning on me. It is the direction the work is pointing, something I never saw in it before but which now seems obvious. Art may once have been a celebration of life—God first, then man, but its final destination became the same as that of its creators. You kill what you paint, tape, sculpt. You take life and flatten it, pin down a moment, a vision, like a butterfly in a case. It may look like you have captured something, the essence of beauty, of meaning, but you have not. You are grasping at the unattainable. Outside the frame life continues, leaving only an illusion behind in the strokes of pigment, the glowing phosphors.

I come to the end of the installation and all the screens but one become dark. On this screen I see Alison's face, terrified. It is the same expression she had in the picture I painted when I was Gaugin.

The last screen fades and a single light comes on. It illuminates the shining form I caught a glimpse of from the doorway.

It is a pyramid of transparent plastic, and there is an object in the centre. As I move around it, trying to squint past the glare from the light, something breaks in me like a dam and I remember putting my headpiece on in the park and turning on the player, becoming Moroz. The memories are a mad jumble and I pitch forward with the force of them, writhing on the floor. I remember now that I was the one who finished the installation, not Alison. She has another role here.

As I curl into myself, the memories spooling out beyond my control, I see clearly through the pyramid to what I know lies at its centre. I stare, rigid, transfixed by Alison's frightened face, her body sealed within the plastic. The core of the installation; the core of my thesis; death as art, the only logical conclusion. I reach down blindly, fumbling for my player.

I'm Paul Gaugin when I leave, stepping out onto her fire escape and into the blinding light. Paris is spread out before me, the sun reflecting from the river that snakes through her centre. I think of the ship that will take me to the far Pacific, my wife and children almost forgotten. Destiny flows through me like the shining Seine through this city—I am its willing tool. They do not understand that I will do anything for my art. •

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ILLUSTRATOR: PETER FRANCIS lives in Halifax, Nova Scotia, with wife Luisa and an insane cat. He has been exhibiting his work at conventions for over ten years, and has contributed to several magazines.

ON Writing:

Two heads *aren't* better than one

Robert J. Sawyer

New writers are often baffled when trying to choose a point of view for their stories and novels. But, actually, the choice is easy. Over ninety percent of all modern speculative fiction is written using the same POV: limited third person.

“Third person” (“she did this; he did that”) means the story is not told in first person (“I did this”), or the always-irritating second person (“you did this”). That’s easy enough. But what does “limited” mean?

It means that although the narration refers to all the characters by third-person pronouns (he, she, it), each self-contained scene follows the viewpoint of one specific character. Consider this example, which is *not* limited but rather is *omniscient* third person, in which the unseen narrator knows what all the characters are thinking:

“Hello, Mrs. Spade. I’m Pierre Tardivel.” He was conscious of how out-of-place his Québécois accent must have sounded here—another reminder that he was intruding. For a moment, Mrs. Spade thought she recognized Pierre.

In the opening of the paragraph, we are inside Pierre’s head: “He was conscious of how out-of-place...” But by the end of the paragraph, we’ve left Pierre’s head and are now inside another character’s: “Mrs. Spade thought she recognized Pierre.”

Here’s the same paragraph rewritten as limited third person, solely from Pierre’s POV.

“Hello, Mrs. Spade. I’m Pierre Tardivel.” He was conscious of how out-of-place his Québécois accent must have sounded here—another reminder that he was intruding. There was a moment while Mrs. Spade looked Pierre up and down during which Pierre thought he saw a flicker of recognition on her face.

See the difference? We stay firmly rooted inside Pierre’s head. Pierre is only aware of what Mrs. Spade is thinking because she gives an outward sign (“a flicker of recognition on her face”) that he can interpret.

Think of your story’s reader as a little person who rides inside the head of one of your characters. When inside a given head, the reader can see, hear, touch, smell,

and taste everything that particular character is experiencing, and he or she can also read the thoughts of that one character. But it takes effort for the little person to move out of one head and into another. Not only that — it's disorienting. Consider this:

Keith smiled at Lianne. She was a gorgeous woman, with a wonderfully curvy figure.

All right: we're settling in for an encounter with a woman from a man's POV. But if the next paragraph says:

Lianne smiled at Keith. He was a handsome man, with a body-builder's physique.

Hey, wait a minute! Suddenly we've jumped into another head, and immersed ourselves in a whole 'nuther set of emotions and feelings. Not only have we lost track of where we are, we've lost track of *who* we are—of which character we're supposed to identify with. Although at first glance, omniscient narration might seem an ideal way to involve the reader in every aspect of the story, it actually ends up making the reader feel unconnected to *all* the characters. The rule is simple: pick one character, and follow the entire scene through his or her eyes only.

Of course, we usually want some idea of what the other characters in the scene are thinking or feeling. That can be accomplished with effective description. To convey puzzlement on the part of someone other than your viewpoint character, write "he scratched his chin" or "she raised an eyebrow" (or, if you really want to hit the reader over the head with it, "she raised an eyebrow quizzically" — "quizzically" being the viewpoint character's interpretation of the action). To convey anger, write "he

ballled his hands into fists," or "his cheeks grew flushed," or "he raised his voice." There are very few emotions that aren't betrayed by outward signs. (This harks back to the show-don't-tell rule, which I talked about in my Winter 1995 *On Writing* column.)

Still, in real life, there are times when you can't tell what someone else is thinking—usually because that person is making a deliberate effort to keep a poker face. If you've adopted the omniscient POV, instead of a limited one, you can't portray such things effectively. Here's a limited POV:

Carlos looked at Wendy, unsure whether he should go on. Her face was a stony mask. "I'm sorry," he said again. "So very sorry."

That's much more intriguing than the omniscient version:

Carlos looked at Wendy, unsure whether he should go on. Wendy thought Carlos had suffered enough and was going to forgive him, but for the moment she didn't say anything. "I'm sorry," he said again. "So very sorry."

In the former, we feel Carlos's insecurity, and we have some suspense about how things are going to turn out. In the latter, there is no suspense. (And, of course, omniscient narration is death—if you'll pardon the expression—in mystery fiction: the reader must be kept ignorant of what the various suspects are thinking, or else it will be obvious which one is guilty.)

Note that I've suggested keeping in one character's head for each individual scene. However, you can freely switch viewpoint characters when you change scenes (either at the end of a chapter, or with a blank line within a chapter).

Many novels have separate plotlines intertwined, with each of them having its own viewpoint character. But what happens when individuals who have been viewpoint characters in disparate plotlines come together in the same scene? Whose POV do you choose then?

In most cases, it'll be whichever one is at the heart of the action of that particular scene. But there are exceptions. One big one is when someone who has been a point-of-view character is about to die. See, the central conceit of modern fiction is that it's actually a form of journalism: the tale you are reading is an account of something that really happened, and the author's job has simply been to interview one witness per scene to the events being described. Well, if your main character dies in a scene, how did he or she subsequently relate his or her feelings to the journalist-author? Even if the dying character has been your viewpoint character throughout most of the story, it's best to be inside another person's head as you watch him or her expire.

(One of the great violations of the journalistic-storytelling model comes from the movie *Citizen Kane*, which, ironically, is a film about journalism: the whole movie revolves around trying to discover the meaning of Charles Foster Kane's dying word, "Rosebud." But the film clearly shows Kane dying alone, with no one witnessing him saying it.

Unless you're a genius comparable to Orson Welles, don't try to get away with this in your own fiction.)

There are other times when you'll want to choose someone besides your protagonist as the POV character for a scene or two. No person really knows how he or she is perceived; you may find it illuminating to do an occasional scene from a secondary character's POV, so that the reader can see your hero as others do. Philip K. Dick did this brilliantly in *The Man in the High Castle*. One of the novel's main characters, Ed McCarthy, is trying to interest a merchant, Robert Childan, in buying some jewelry he and his partner have designed. Ed seems clever and in control in the scenes leading up to the sales pitch to the merchant—but when it comes time for the actual pitch, Dick plants us firmly inside the merchant's head, and we see Ed McCarthy in a new light:

[McCarthy] wore a slightly-less-than fashionable suit. His voice had a strangled quality. He'll lay everything out, Childan knew. Watching me out of the corner of his eye every second. To see if I'm taking any interest. Any at all.

For each scene, choose your point-of-view character with care. Stick with that one person throughout the scene—and you'll find that readers are sticking with your story all the way until the end. •

ROBERT J. SAWYER's latest novel is *Starplex*, just out from Ace. His novel *The Terminal Experiment* won both the Nebula and the Aurora this year. His books have been translated into German, Italian, Japanese, Polish, and Russian. Visit his World Wide Web home page at:

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• **SEPT 13 - 15 WINCON 96** (Winnipeg) — Ramada Marlborough Inn, Winnipeg, MB. GoH Bill Littlepage (Highlander RPG), National WYVERN & HIGHLANDER tournaments. Info: Box 28073, 1453 Henderson Hwy, Winnipeg MB R2G 4E9. D.DERKSEN@GEnie.com

• **SEPT 14 FALCON 96** (Halifax) - Lord Nelson Hotel, Halifax, NS. One-day SF Gathering. Guests: Robert J. Sawyer, Fan GoH: Michael Gallant. Art GoH: Peter Francis, Luisa Nadalini. Memb: \$2 at door. Info: Box 36123, Halifax NS B3J 3S9.

• **SEPT 27 - 29 AMBERCON NORTH** (Toronto) — Embassy Suites Hotel, Hwy 7 & Warden Ave., Markham. \$119 single/double. Wargame Con, Amber Diceless RPG. GoH Erick Wujcik (game designer). Memb: \$80 (incl. 3 suppers, 2 lunches). NO on-site registration. Info: 3 Quaiser Ct., Guelph ON N1G 4K1.

• **SEPT 28 - 29 OURCON** (Winnipeg) — Assiniboine Gordon Inn on the Park. Winnipeg's celebration of Star Trek's 30th Anniversary. GoH: TBA. Memb: \$25 till Sept 1/96 (includes dinner). \$30 at door, dinner/dance extra. Info: PO Box 67001, RPO Maples, Winnipeg MB R2P 2T3.

• **OCT 4 - 6 CANGAMES XX** (Ottawa) — Congress Centre, Ottawa. Canad's Premier Wargaming con. Info: 162 Laurier Ave. W, Ottawa ON K1P 5J4 or (613) 236-2972 or cangames@iosphere.net

• **OCT 18 - 20 WESTERN CHALLENGE** (Saskatoon) — U of Sask. Arts Building. Wargame Con: AD & D, Magic, etc. Registration: \$3. Info: 211 Bottomly Ave. S, Saskatoon SK S7N 1K6 (306) 652-5696

• **OCT 24 - 27 NORTHSTAR 1** (Harrison Hot Springs) — Harrison Hot Springs Hotel,

BC \$83/96 per night, reservations L 1-800-663-2266. GoH: S.M. Sterling, Fan GoH: R. Graeme Cameron. Editor GoH: Forest J. Ackerman. Guests also include producers of TV series *Sliders* and *Highlander*. Memb: \$40 till 24 Sept/96, \$55 at door. 90% of net proceeds to benefit BC Childrens Hospitals. Info: PO Box 61007, 571 West 57th Ave., Vancouver BC V6P 6S5 (604) 951-7827. Email: cathy_mayo@mindlink.bc.ca

• **OCT 25 - 27 CONCINNITY '96** (Ottawa) — Comfort Inn by Journey's End, 222 Hearst Way, Kanata, ON. Relaxacon. GoHs: Lloyd & Yvonne Penny, & Larry Stewart. Dance & model contest. Memb: \$20 till 30 Sept/96, \$25 at door. Info: 26076-72 Robertson Rd, Nepean ON K2H 578 or bw306@Freenet.carleton.ca

• **NOV 1 - 3 PRIMEDIA/EYE OF ORION IV** (Toronto) — Days Inn, 627 Airport Rd. GoH: Chris Carter (*X-Files*). Memb: \$25 till 30 Sept/96. Info: 114-22 Tinder Cres., Toronto ON M4A 1L6 or <http://www.io.org/~kcozens/primedia/>

• **NOV 8 - 10 CONQUEST 1996** (Vancouver) — "Vancouver's Premiere Gaming Convention." GoH: Sandy Petersen (id SoftWare and Chaosium Inc.). Vancouver Gamers Society, PO Box 27274 Collingwood PO, Vancouver BC V5R 6A8. Email c/o Michael_Beck@mindlink.bc.ca

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Theme: Youth Writing & Art – Nicole Luiken, Peter Tupper, Keynyn Brysse, Cory Doctorow, Rhonda Whittaker, Christine Gertz, Cairo & X, Jeb Gaudet, Marissa Kochanski, & Monica Hughes. Cover: Deven Kumar.
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Wesley Herbert, Michael Teasdale, Lyn McConchie, Sally McBride, Bruce Taylor, M.A.C. Farrant, Donna Farley, Amber Hayward, Lorina J. Stephens, Alice Major. Guest Editorial: Lorna Toolis & Michael Skeet. Art Features: Martin Springett, Tim Hammell. *Aurora-winning cover*: Lynne Taylor Fahnstalk.
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J.R. Martel, Cheryl Merkel, Preston Hapon, Jason Kapalka, Linda Smith, Catherine Girzczy, Robert Baillie, Sean Stewart (excerpt from *Nobody's Son*), Tim Hammell. Cover: Marc Holmes.
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Theme: Over the Edge – Erik Jon Spiegel, M.A.C. Farrant, Lyle Weis, Robert Boyczuk, Jason Kapalka, John Skaife, Michael Hetherington, Dirk L. Schaeffer, Eileen Kernaghan, Tim Hammell. Cover: Kenneth Scott.
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Robert J. Sawyer, Jason Kapalka, Bill Wren, Marian L. Hughes, Alison Baird, Bruce Barber, Nicholas de Kruyff, Hugh A.D. Spencer, Barry Hammond, Colleen Anderson, Tim Hammell. Cover: Rob Alexander.
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Derryl Murphy, Catherine MacLeod, T. Robert Szekely, Robert Boyczuk, Ivan Dorin, Luke O'Grady, M.A.C. Farrant, A.R. King, Wesley Herbert, Dave Duncan (excerpt from *The Stricken Field*). Cover: Robert Pasternak.
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Theme: Hard SF, Karl Schroeder, Leah Silverman, Jean-Louis Trudel, Cory Doctorow, Phillip A. Hawke, Jason Kapalka, Wesley Herbert, Lydia Langstaff, Leslie Gadallah. Cover: James Beveridge.
- **Vol. 6, No. 2** (#17) Summer/94
Peter Watts, Harold Côté, Karin Lowachee, Bonnie Blake, Kate Riedel, Wesley Herbert, Hugh A.D. Spencer, Brian Burke, Jocko, Catherine Girzczy. Cover: Jean-Pierre Normand.
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Theme: Horror & Dark Fantasy. Lyle Weis, Eileen Kernaghan, Peter Watts, Marie Jakober, Tanis MacDonald, Peter Darbyshire, David Nickle, L.R. Morrison. *Art Feature*: Peter Francis. *Nonfiction*: Barry Hammond, Robert J. Sawyer. Cover: Adrian Kleinbergen.
- **Vol. 7, No. 2** (#21) Summer/95
Heather Spears, Brent Hayward, Mary Soon Lee, Jason Kapalka, Erik Jon Spiegel, Bruce Barber, Karen Keeley Wiebe, Jan Lars Jensen, Sandra Kasturi, Kirsten Oulton. *Art Feature*: W.B. Johnston. *Nonfiction*: Robert J. Sawyer. Cover: W.B. Johnston.
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Theme: Cross-genre. David Nickle, Michael Skeet, Steve Zipp, Preston Hapon, D.G. Valdron, Ven Begamudrű, Colleen Anderson, Leah Silverman. *Nonfiction*: Barry Hammond, Robert J. Sawyer. Cover: James Beveridge.
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Yves Meynard, Tanya Huff, Nicholas de Kruyff, Rebecca M. Senese, Michael Teasdale, Erik Jon Spiegel, Leslie Gadallah, Sandra Kasturi, Derek Fairbridge. *Nonfiction*: Robert J. Sawyer. Cover: George Barr.

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